



MAID

IN

THE

Stars

AN ASSIGNATION TO REMEMBER

BOOK THREE

ANGELA JOHNSON

MAID  
*IN*  
THE  
*Stars*

MAID  
*IN*  
THE  
*Stars*

ANGELA JOHNSON

Copyright © 2021 Angela Johnson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form whatsoever, whether by graphic, visual, electronic, film, microfilm, tape recording, or any other means, without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief passages embodied in critical reviews and articles.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination, and are not to be construed as real. The views expressed within this work are the sole responsibility of the author.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-955534-02-4

Cover Artist: Shawnda Craig

Edited by: Rachel Hathcock & Ellipsis Editing

Published by: Pemberley Publishing

*For my mom, dad, and Jena. Viewing the Aurora Borealis with you will forever be a fond memory. I wish everyone had the opportunity to see the Northern Lights.*

*(We can forget about the rest of the trip)*

## Contents

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12  
Chapter 13  
Chapter 14  
Chapter 15  
Chapter 16  
Chapter 17  
Chapter 18  
Chapter 19  
Chapter 20  
Chapter 21  
Chapter 22  
Chapter 23  
Chapter 24  
Chapter 25  
Chapter 26  
Chapter 27  
Chapter 28  
Chapter 29  
Chapter 30  
Chapter 31  
Chapter 32  
Chapter 33  
Chapter 34  
Chapter 35  
Chapter 36  
Chapter 37  
Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Angela Johnson

## Chapter 1

Lilith wasn't born with the natural gift of scrubbing chamber pots, which was a pity since she was the current scullery maid at Woodland Manor. Her shortcomings with the position weren't for lack of trying, as she worked hard and kept a positive attitude, but her soft hands and love of nature greatly hindered her work.

Grabbing the nearest bucket, Lilith rushed out to the orchard thankful to be in the brisk morning air. Autumn, her favorite time of year, happened to be the perfect time to pick apples. Skipping through the grounds with a smile spread across her face, Lilith tried to find joy in the position she'd acquired as a scullery maid. At the age of eighteen, she had no other choice, except allowing her mother and sisters to starve.

With each apple snapping away from the branches, the smell of sweet juice mixed with the crisp breeze from the sea entered her nose. Before the week was out, apple pickers would be hired to bring in the bushels. She wouldn't need to spend her mornings wandering through the orchard with a basket.

It made Lilith sad to think about the trees losing their fruit and leaves for another winter season. With a basket full of apples, she trudged back through the grounds of Woodland Manor to the kitchen through the servants' entrance.

"What's put a frown on that lovely face of yours?" Mrs. Connolly took the basket of apples and sorted through them while periodically looking up in the conversation.

"The leaves are falling from the trees." Lilith grabbed a towel to help wash the fruit.

"Happens every year." Mrs. Connolly's Irish lilt rang through the busy kitchen.

Lilith nodded. "Yes. But it makes me sad."

Mrs. Connolly put her hands on the counter and smiled at her with an air of understanding. "You'll find your way and enjoy working. You can't stay a child for the rest of your life."

It was easier to allow Mrs. Connolly to think her reticence in her position was due to age. But Lilith wasn't born to do such work, and

she was the only one at Woodland Manor with the knowledge of her past. "I know. But the trees look so sad without their beauty."

"You speak of trees like a normal person speaks of people. Get such thinking out of your mind. It won't do you any good in the position of maid."

"Do you ever get tired of the mundane tasks we have to perform?" Lilith usually didn't allow herself to think such things, but the sadness of the orchard and the sound of the leaves crunching under her feet brought the memories of childhood and running through open fields back to her mind. She longed for the day she could go home. Longed for a life she couldn't go back to. Her father's death took away that possibility.

"No, I don't. And you best be getting to your duties before Mrs. Bell or Mr. Jensen find you daydreaming. You'll be out of a position if they do."

Mrs. Connolly was right, and Lilith knew if she were caught daydreaming it would land her in the housekeeper's office. The last warning put a great deal of fear in Lilith's mind.

"Lilith!" Mrs. Connolly called out, as she left to tidy the servant's hall. "Come spring, there will be blossoms aplenty on those beautiful trees. No need to fret while they take a winter nap."

Smiling in appreciation, Lilith turned back to the woman she'd chosen to think of as a second mother. "Thank you, Mrs. Connolly. You always know how to cheer me up."

"Off with you now. Don't be neglecting your duties."

"Will you teach me how to make the pastry dough, after I am finished with the servants' tea?"

A smile lit up Mrs. Connolly's face. "You won't be hoping to take my position as head chef one of these days?"

"Only when you retire to live a beautiful life away from service."

Lilith skipped off to the servants' hall ignoring the grumbled reply from the chef. Mrs. Connolly made it plain she wasn't going to retire from service. She enjoyed cooking and baking, and no amount of persuasion would take her away from a family that loved her meals.

Life as a servant was predictable in many ways. Lilith's daily chores were set out for her on the day she arrived. As the scullery maid, she was to rise at six o'clock every morning to dress. By six thirty, her bed chamber would be tidy, and she was expected to stoke the kitchen fire to the perfect heat for cooking and boiling water. The worst of her duties was emptying chamber pots for each of the female servants. If she could get away without doing one thing each day, it would be the chamber pots.

The rest of her day was focused on making life tolerable for the other servants. In the servants' hall she would prepare tea, set out tea,



clean up after tea, and do the same for each meal. In short, Lilith was a servant to the servants. As a person who spent her day doing mundane tasks, a trip to the orchard was a treat. The only time available to spend on herself— other than her half day off work— was between when duties were completed and bedtime. By then it was dark, and all she could do was spend her evening looking at the stars or reading a book.

She enjoyed both the stars and books, but there were also other pursuits a young lady of her age and birth should attend. As a servant Lilith was neglecting her artistic talents. Lilith loved to paint masterful scenes of the night sky and the surrounding nature. She was wonderful with both watercolors and acrylic. If only her paintings had been masterful enough to sell, then she wouldn't have taken a position as a maid. It would've made life much easier and tolerable.

Instead of daydreaming about a time long past, Lilith set her mind on the chores left to be completed. It was easier being a maid when she suppressed all thoughts about her previous life.

## Chapter 2

The ballroom at Lord and Lady Aimsbury's London townhome was overcrowded. Kate waved her fan until her wrist hurt and then decided the lack of a dance partner meant she didn't have to stay indoors. It was difficult having two older and two younger sisters. Her position as middle daughter left her practically unnoticed.

Eyeing her favorite *pet* to torture, Kate let a little laugh escape her throat. Mr. Wells would rue the day they'd met if she had anything to say about it. Since she was the more fortunate and wealthier one in Society, she planned to make his life miserable. Kate leaned over to her closest friend, Mary, and whispered, "Frog-faced Wells has arrived. Do you think the warts are troublesome for his sisters as well?"

"Keep that pest away from us. What a fright to have him in the ballroom. One would think he hopes to dance." Mary's response was exactly what Kate had hoped.

"Keep your gloves tightly on your hands, my dear girl. If he does ask you for a jaunt, you will want protection from his germs." Closing her fan, she stepped away from Mary and around clusters of people chatting and enjoying the evening.

Arriving in town only a few days previously, Kate was already bored with the same gentlemen, same parties as the previous year, and Society as a whole. She wanted adventure outside the ballroom. Purposefully walking toward a group of men she knew would bring entertainment, she smiled as one instantly took her bait.

"I saw you escape and knew I must see what has you so occupied. A gentleman would never allow a beautiful lady to walk alone." Mr. Swenson took hold of her elbow as if she needed him to guide her out to the cool night air.

Kate turned with an appraising glare and simpered. "I do not see any gentlemen in my vicinity."

Mr. Swenson pulled her away from the terrace doors. A short walk to the library told her she'd flirted with the right rake.

"You are correct, my lady. Although, what would your father say if he knew you were a willing partner in this charade?"

Kate lifted her chin to the exact height of snobbery and sniffed in his direction. "What makes you certain I will not scream and claim you forced me into this secluded chamber?"

"The glow of excitement in your eyes."

"I know not of what you speak. Perhaps you should find a willing partner amongst the spinsters or widows."

Mr. Swenson grabbed her arm and pulled her into his embrace. "If you were not willing, you should have taken your leave."

Unwilling to wait for him to finally bring his mouth to hers, Kate instigated the kiss. A boring party with a bunch of her parent's acquaintances seemed unredeemable moments before, but as Mr. Swenson deepened the kiss and pressed her roughly against a wall of books, Kate was certain her night could get no better.

"What the devil is going on in here?"

Mr. Swenson moved away dropping her. She hadn't expected the intrusion, nor Swenson's lack of manners which left her tumbling to the ground.

"Nate!" Kate tried to control the fear of getting caught in a tryst, but the shrill cry ripping from her throat brought more onlookers into the room. As her father entered, his face turned red at the scene before him.

"Papa, this is not what it seems."

Kate hadn't realized her dress was still askew until her father turned away. Taking a moment to hide her shame, Kate smoothed her skirt and top before her mother entered.

"I heard Kate's voice. What has happened?"

"Mama, it is best we allow father to handle the situation." Nate turned to leave but stopped as their father closed the door to keep further patrons from entering the library. This also meant her mother and brother were there for the duration.

"Mr. Swenson, what have you to say for the scandal you and my daughter have created?"

"Scandal?" Mr. Swenson placed a horrified hand over his chest. "I know not what you speak of, my lord."

Kate turned to Nate hoping he would help her out of the predicament. Mr. Swenson was sufficient for a tantalizing kiss and a bit of play, but she didn't like him enough to be forced into marriage. There was truly no harm in their actions. She was already ruined. What would one more tryst do? When Nate didn't speak on her behalf, Kate vowed to make him regret the decision.

Her brother stood rooted to his spot watching as their father accused Mr. Swenson and her of an egregious act.

"I would not expect a man of your loose morals to accept responsibility without force. What will it take for you to redeem your

actions with my daughter?"

Kate had to stop this from going further. Mr. Swenson wasn't a suitable husband. Not for her. She wanted a titled man with more wealth than Swenson could possibly dream of having.

"Papa, you have misunderstood the situation. We were only speaking and when Nate entered the room I tripped, which caused my dress to fall lopsided. It was nothing more than an accident."

Her father focused on the books behind her instead of meeting her gaze. She knew from his expression and the red of his cheeks that the earl wasn't fooled.

"In this moment you will not call me papa. You will refer to me as father or Norwood."

This pronouncement shocked her. Kate knew she'd finally pushed her father past the point of immediate forgiveness. This was a serious situation.

"Lord Norwood," she said, hoping for a tone of respect. "It is not as terrible as you currently imagine."

"I am a man, Kate. I know exactly what has happened here." Turning back to Mr. Swenson, her father pointed at him with one finger. "Nate will go for a special license. You and Kate will be married tonight."

Mr. Swenson smiled, indulgently. "Lord Norwood, I am afraid I must decline this exceptional invitation to join your family. If only it had come a month ago, I could have taken you up on the offer."

"What are you speaking of?" Norwood's face turned a brighter shade of red. Kate wondered if her father was unwell, as she'd never seen him take his anger to such levels.

"I was married last month in my village. Word has yet to reach London, but my wife is tucked away in our little home near Ipswich. Trust me when I say it is a shame I cannot collect on Kate's dowry for my wife brought far less to our union than I would have received from you."

Although Kate wasn't averse to married men, she suddenly found Mr. Swenson to be despicable. "Mr. Swenson, it is only appropriate to have such assignations with married women when the man is in the marriage state."

Her father crossed the room and took hold of her arm. "It is never acceptable or appropriate for such a circumstance. Have your mother and I not taught you anything?"

"Father," Nate held his hands out as his face contorted in worry. "You must calm down. Kate and Mr. Swenson have engaged in improper behavior, but it is no reason to cause you an apoplexy."

Kate looked to her father to see his face was turning a shade of purple. Shame filled her chest, and she understood her actions were

wrong. But she couldn't be expected to behave as her parents had during their seasons. It had been at least thirty years since they were courting. Times had changed and they had to understand women weren't expected to be stuck in archaic, unloving relationships. She was a passionate woman and needed a man who could handle her desires.

"I am not a child any longer. Even if you do not care to see the changes in Society, they are happening. Sitting in parlors accepting bouquets of flowers from men you spoke to the previous evening is not the fashionable trend any longer. If Mr. Swenson and I had finished our little tryst, I would have enjoyed the flowers he is bound to send much more than I will now."

"Do not push my resolve any further." Norwood pushed her toward Nate. "Take your sister back to Ingram House. Your mother and I will follow with the rest of your sisters."

She was thankful Nate held her arm in a less possessive and kinder grip. But he knew her well enough not to let go, as she'd make leaving difficult by finding friends to speak with and eventually, she'd talk him out of leaving. As he pulled her toward the exit and assisted her into the carriage, Kate replayed his lack of help toward her situation with their father and confirmed her desire to repay his traitorous behavior. They were siblings. They were supposed to defend each other against their parents.

"Why did you not defend me?"

Nate sat across from her in the carriage. She could see the outline of his face as his head shook. The carriage lamp showed the tight strain of his disapproval.

"Kate, why do you engage in such situations? You are better than this behavior."

"Perhaps I am not."

"You continue to punish yourself for what Grey did so many years ago? It has been five years. When will you go back to the loving sister you once were?"

"She no longer exists. Men do not want a ruined woman."

"No one was aware of your disgrace until now. Father will not be able to hide what happened tonight."

Kate turned away from Nate. He was right. Nate's moral compass surpassed that of anyone she knew. He should have studied to be a vicar. Instead, he spent his nights with his head in the stars.

Kate was halfway up the stairs when her parents and sisters entered Ingram House. Upon his arrival, Norwood made his only announcement.

"We are leaving in the morning."

She knew there should be a sense of humiliation for what she'd

done. Perhaps there was something terribly wrong with her because she had a hint of a smile urging to break free from her forced frown. With her father's pronouncement, it turned to anger.

Leaving town to spend the winter at the bottom of England on the Isle of Wight was the ultimate punishment. Her reputation was ruined, but she'd long ago mourned her wanton state. The only difference now was that all of Society, including her family, knew of her situation.

Nate preferred Woodland Manor to their home in London.

Secretly, he was thankful Kate caused a ruckus and forced their parents to leave town until spring. Christmas in the country was always better, and although there were still a few months before the holiday, autumn in the country was easier to digest than the smog in London. He also didn't have to worry about flirting with women while at home. It was a time to relax and reevaluate priorities.

He planned to spend the majority of his time in the library, secluded away while watching the rain turn to snow. He opened a periodical with William Herschel's latest article on the study of the universe. Nate had chosen to study astronomy during his time at Cambridge, a completely useless subject according to his father. But he'd enjoyed every moment of it. The mathematical equations used to chart the night sky left him in awe of what was left to be discovered, for he was certain there was much more to find among the stars.

Removing his spectacles, Nate rubbed his tired eyes as the door to the library flew open. He'd found solitude amongst the books for only a short time. Disappointment flowed through him as he looked up to find his family joining him.

"Nate, you should not have your nose in a book at all hours unless you want to lose your eyesight." Kate sat next to him and pulled the magazine from his hands. "You need to get out of the house more often. Perhaps spend time looking at the stars instead of reading about them."

"A wonderful idea. I will do so tonight."

Rilla threw herself onto the sofa opposite Nate in a dramatic display of her displeasure. "Do not speak of the evening. If we were in London, we would be dressing for the soiree at Duke Hargrove's mansion. I will never forgive you Kate."

"We never enjoy an evening with Hargrove. Do not pretend to be disgruntled over missing this one event." Kate threw her hands up in a gesture of annoyance, hoping to elicit laughter. It didn't work.

Rilla wasn't amused. "I do not care for Hargrove. But I do want to present myself to the eligible men in London. I do not plan to be a

widow long.”

Their father cleared his throat and glared at Kate. All chatter in the room ceased with his stare of displeasure. “It is true we do not care for Hargrove’s company. But he is a member of the peerage, and it is a disservice to our acquaintance with him that we are not in attendance. I hope I do not need to remind you of the embarrassment you caused our family.”

“No, Papa.” Kate looked down in a proper show of remorse.

“I do not know how we will show our faces in London again. Have we not raised our children to behave? Did we do wrong by every single one of you?” Norwood kept his eyes on Kate as he spoke, leaving everyone clear as to his reprimand.

Leigh took a seat near the fire in one of the lone chairs and rested his legs on the ottoman. “Father, we need not worry about scandal. Lord and Lady Trenton will smooth the ruffled feathers left in Kate’s wake. By the opening of spring Parliament, all will be forgotten.”

“If Lord and Lady Trenton agree to acknowledge us as family,” Norwood barked, his face turning a bright red.

It was rare to see his father in such a state of outrage. Instead of sitting or pacing the room, Norwood leaned upon the back of the sofa staring directly into Kate’s abashed face—to see his sister ashamed was shocking.

Norwood continued his angry retort. “I will not blame them if they choose to distance themselves from our family. If Samuel and Abigail had been in town, they would be seeking a way to disown the family as well.”

Nate looked to his oldest brother to see him shaking his head in exasperation. “Father, Abby and I do not see a need to save our reputations from Kate’s actions. We plan to accompany you in the spring as decided before.”

Samuel’s words went unnoticed by their father. He kept his gaze concentrated on Kate. Due to Nate’s proximity to his sister, he squirmed in discomfort under the disapproving glare. He hadn’t done anything to deserve reproof. Looking around the room at each of his siblings, he knew from their fidgeting they also felt the sting of Norwood’s irritation.

“Nate?” Kate’s voice quivered, her hands shaking as she held the periodical out to him. “Did you find anything interesting in this magazine?”

All concern over his father’s gaze left as Nate took the periodical from his sister and corrected her use of the word *magazine*. “You make it sound like this is a simple magazine with our sister’s novelettes. I will have you know this is a scientific periodical. Astronomers within the Royal Society have their articles published within this work. This



is not a silly, romantic publication.”

“So, they have not discovered any new planets?” Kate’s voice was strained, but Nate ignored the reasons and continued with his thought.

“Astronomers believe they can use a mathematical formula to find another planet given the disturbances caused by Uranus’s pull of gravity. It is all very interesting.” He opened the periodical and pointed to the article he’d finished reading right before he’d been interrupted. “If you would like to read about it, the information is here.”

Kate shook her head, her eyes locked on their father. “No thank you, Nate. I trust you know of what you are speaking.”

The tension settled upon him as he turned back to see their father hadn’t relaxed his stance. Instead of continuing with his next thoughts on trying to map out the stars himself, Nate stopped speaking.

“Papa?” Kate’s voice came out much more innocent than the situation required, given her family knew she was guilty.

Norwood stood straight, his round midsection slightly jutting out. Nate noticed the loss of weight in his father. At the request of his countess, the earl had worked hard to eat less and take more exercise in the gardens over the summer, and the effort showed.

“If I were any other man in the peerage, you would be in a cottage instead of my library. Do not test my patience.”

Nate regretted his intrusion on the situation with Swenson, but knew if he hadn’t happened upon the couple, much worse could have occurred. Embarrassed at the level of disgrace they were dealing with and how his actions had lead to all of Society knowing of the situation, Nate looked down at the periodical in his hands. He wondered how his father would make this scandal go away.

Their father continued to admonish everyone in the room. “There will be no more scandals for any of my children. Is this understood?”

Nate nodded along with the rest of his siblings. He planned to have a perfectly respectable marriage, but not for another ten years.

Turning to a life of service took its toll on her body, even for a

woman as young as Lilith. By the time daily responsibilities were finished, she found her feet, legs, neck, and back aching. There were moments she wanted to pull out a beautiful gown and spend the evening lounging with a book in the library, but as a maid this was not possible. In her former life, the gown would be the latest fashion and much nicer than that of a servant.

The room she'd been assigned had a small window above her bed. She was lucky to have the tiny opening out to the world beyond. The window didn't open, but it didn't matter. The ability to look out to the night sky was more than most servants had, but even with this view, she missed quiet evenings on the veranda with her family.

The pain in her back and neck increased as she tilted her head and held it in the same position to view the heavens. *This would be easier if I were out of doors.* She rested her head against the wall hoping the pain would ease. *Why should I not take a walk?* Servants weren't forbidden from walking the grounds. When finished with chores, they were free to do as they pleased until bedtime.

With this happy thought, Lilith rushed to her closet and removed one of the dresses she'd brought for her half days. It was silly to change her clothing, because she only had a short time before she would have to go to bed but removing the soiled dress from her day of work released a small amount of the pain from her body. The relief of putting on a clean, dry, non-work dress brought a sigh of joy and improved her mood.

Rushing down the long hallway to the stairs leading out to the orchard, Lilith could almost imagine this new life away. She wondered what her mother and sisters were doing. Letters from the family consisted of everything and nothing. They told her she was loved, and thanked her for entering service to support the dwindling bank account left to their mother. Her sisters lamented her absence but knew it was necessary. On a beautiful evening such as this, her family would sit under a tree in the cottage yard, so she would do the same. If she imagined hard enough, they would be with her at Woodland

Manor.

Skipping across the finely manicured lawn, she entered the orchard with very little time to enjoy the evening. Choosing the perfect spot against a tall, old, apple tree, Lilith sat back and peered up at the starbrimmed sky. It was the perfect night for viewing the heavens. When she was younger, she wished upon the stars for silly, insignificant things. Now she wished her father were still alive. If he were, she would be home in a nice comfortable house. Her ancestral home was different than Woodland Manor. It was the perfect place to raise a family. Due to the entail, her uncle and his wife would be the ones to live at the home now.

Emotions rose up as she remembered the day she'd helped her mother pack their trunks with the little things they were allowed to take from the home. Little keepsakes that had now been sold to put food on the table. Pushing the hurt aside, Lilith knew tears wouldn't come even if she wanted them to. Her thoughts were now a jumble of disappointment and outrage with family and friends, and they didn't deserve her tears. They were people who'd claimed they would help and always be a source of strength but when the time came, no one had been supportive. The fake pleasantries of Society faded as quickly as their bank account. She and her mother had to rely on each other for everything.

She walked down the path that would lead to the sea and her thoughts changed to her father. Life had a way of taking people out of comfortable situations, which is exactly what had happened with Lilith and her family. She'd once loved the ocean, but now thought it to be a vast, careless bit of water. Her father had died somewhere in that ocean. His body lay beneath the cold waves never to be found or returned. Shaking away the mournful thought, Lilith continued her walk.

It was still warm out, especially for autumn. Her path was clear with the light from the moon, so she walked with her head turned up to see the stars. She'd never been able to make out the constellations amongst the sea of lights dancing in the sky, so she'd made a game of finding images— much like her sisters did on cloudy days. Entertaining thoughts of her father, she gave way to fanciful notions and wondered if the stars were angles armed with telescopes looking down at the people of earth. Was her father looking upon her? Did he know what had happened to them after his death?

In an effort to pull herself out of thoughts that would take her down a path of sadness, Lilith took hold of her skirt and danced her way along the open walkway. The lighthearted activity took her back to a simpler time and brought a smile to her face. At this moment she didn't have to worry about tea, cakes, brooms, and dustpans. She

didn't have to serve anyone. She could pretend to be a fine lady without a care in the world.

The clomping of hooves entered her mind as the dance turned into a skip, but she ignored the sound. There were many other things on her mind, like fashion. She would love to own a new hat.

The drumming of hooves on the path should have pulled her out of the imaginary scenario where she welcomed a fine gentleman into her home, but it didn't. She imagined he would ask her to go for a ride through the countryside, and she would accept.

"What the devil are you doing out here?"

The sound of a man's voice made her stop dancing. Her voice shook as a frightened scream tore from her throat. Gathering her wits, she watched as he dismounted to stand before her.

"Are you alone?"

Too startled to answer his questions, Lilith stepped backward in fear. She didn't know this man.

"I apologize for frightening you." He stepped closer, then stopped. "My name is Nate. I will not harm you."

With the light from the moon, she could see his soft features. He was young, tall, and beautiful. She knew he would be the man she imagined inviting into her fake parlor from that moment forward.

Finding her voice, Lilith squeaked out a reply. "Miss Lilith Bradley."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"I will escort you home. It is unwise to be out so late on your own." His matter-of-fact manner left her reeling.

"No." The word came out in a rush. It was silly, but she didn't want this man to know she was a servant. But she also knew she couldn't pretend to be part of the family at Woodland Manor as he most likely knew Earl and Countess Norwood. "I live nearby. It is not necessary to see me home. You must be on your way to an engagement or your own home. I would not wish to make you late."

The skeptical look on his face told her she wasn't fooling him. "If you tell me where you live, I can decide if it is too far out of my way."

"Sir, I thank you for the offer, but I hoped to spend a bit of time looking at the night sky." It was the only way she could see out of having him escort her to Woodland Manor. She hoped he would take the excuse and leave.

Nate looked up, his face scrunched in thought. "It is a beautiful night. A cloudless sky is rare this time of year. I have only just finished gazing at it myself. There is a clearing to the left of here perfect for such viewing."

"You were looking at the stars?"

“Yes, does this surprise you?”

“No.” Again her answer was quick. Nervous from his penetrating gaze, Lilith tried to remember where he said the clearing was located. “The clearing is to the right?”

“No, the left. It is close by, but I do not think it wise for you to venture over there alone and in the dark. Might I accompany you?”

“No!” It was her third time squeaking out an answer in the negative. She closed her eyes and stepped away. “I thank you for the location, sir. But I really must be on my way.”

Nate looked around. “I must insist on escorting you. If you were to be harmed after I leave, I would never forgive myself.”

“But you will never know, sir, as you do not know who I am or where I reside.”

“I must press you to tell me where you live.”

“No, for at this moment I do not wish to return to my place of residence.”

“There is nothing I can do to persuade you of the dangerous course you are on?”

Lilith smiled and shook her head. “No, sir. For I am content with my current goal of viewing the stars.”

“Then I will leave you to it. But please, if you are distressed in any way, stop me before I take my leave.”

“I assure you I am capable of finding my way home. Thank you for your concern.” Lilith turned away from the man standing before her and slowly made her way toward the mysterious clearing before he could convince her to stay.

She didn’t allow any thoughts to enter her mind until she heard the pounding of hooves moving away from her position. Instead of finishing her walk, Lilith realized it was late and she should make her way back to the manor. Morning would come far too soon, and she had no desire to fight fatigue while doing chores. The clearing would have to wait for another day.

Nate left his horse to the care of the stable master and found

his way to the parlor. He was preoccupied with thoughts of the woman he'd left on the side of the road, and his regret at not escorting her home brought him a great deal of guilt. As a gentleman, it was his duty. But he also understood the impropriety of having made introductions without a third party. He would watch for Lilith at the next social gathering and find a common acquaintance.

He sauntered into the parlor and found a seat next to the window. The presence of his family sat on the edge of his mind as he considered the distracting woman. From his position, he had a fine sight of the beauty above him, but it was better while standing in the open air with the smell of salt blowing off the sea. He only wished he'd had the good sense to accompany Miss Bradley to the clearing.

A laugh escaped under his breath as he thought of the woman he'd found dancing down the lane. It wasn't exactly proper of her to behave in such a way, but with the late hour, she most likely thought there wouldn't be any other travelers out. He again considered the impropriety of leaving her to travel home unaccompanied. But short of forcing his company on her, he'd done what he could, given the situation.

"What are you smarting over?" Diana nudged his shoulder to gain his attention.

He hadn't realized there was a silly smile on his face until she asked. Thoughts of the woman he'd encountered continued to fill his mind. Her wide eyes and youthful countenance brought him joy. He wondered at her desire to look at the stars. Was it a passing fancy? Or did she enjoy the night lights?

"Nothing you need to concern yourself over."

"I know better than to think it is a woman. You are worse than I am when it comes to courting."

"Yes, but I have time, while you do not." The words came out before he realized the pain they would inflict.

"You are right. I have left marriage to the last hour."

Closing his eyes in embarrassment, Nate needed to make amends

for his careless comment. "Diana, I am a fool. I should not be so careless with my words."

"Do not worry. You are in the majority of our siblings who believe this way." Diana looked away.

He knew she was hiding tears, but he didn't know what to say to apologize. The lack of suitors for his eldest sister was a curious situation. Her personality and beauty were second to none. If those qualities weren't enough, her dowry was sufficient to capture the heart, or rather, pocketbook of most men. Their family had important connections; in short, there wasn't much Diana lacked. Her accomplishments in embroidery, painting, languages, and music should have secured her a match within her first season. Yet, there was something lacking in the attention she received from men.

"Why does everyone else get to fall in love and I have to settle for a man barely above despicable?"

"No one wants you to marry where you will be miserable. Trenton and Samuel told father they would ensure you are cared for, even if you never marry."

He thought the words would bring comfort, instead Diana openly dissolved into tears. Before he could apologize further, all of his unmarried sisters attacked. Faces contorted in rage upon hearing a repeat of his insensitive words, Nate knew he needed to escape before they were finished comforting their eldest sister.

Looking to his father to apologize for the outbreak of anger and tears, Nate tilted his head and mouthed the word *sorry*. His father shook his head with a smirk. Nate knew what it meant. No one would save him from the onslaught of righteous indignation on behalf of Diana.

He escaped the room as Rilla shouted in his direction. "Perhaps one day you will understand how it feels to be considered a burden upon the family. Our youngest sister married before the eldest, which made all of us obsolete in the eyes of Society."

He'd never considered any of his sisters a burden, but there was no reason to argue. Once the women were set in their thinking, they were difficult to dissuade from attack. If Diana wanted to know what he thought of her, he'd tell her she was accomplished and handsome. He would tell Adele she was accomplished and witty. Kate was accomplished and a pretender. Rilla was also accomplished and high-browed. Debra was accomplished and imaginative. As he went through the list of his many sisters, he realized the problem and understood the reason his sisters were upset. There was very little to set them apart. Unwilling to go back into the parlor, Nate took the stairs two at a time to rush his escape. He didn't want to be in the vicinity when the rest of the family departed for bed as he feared

they'd ask him to list out their accomplishments, which were so similar it would not end well for him.



Not even one of her brothers was intelligent, where women were concerned. Kate watched as Nate turned their eldest sister into a watering pot and then escaped as he couldn't handle the tears. He'd been in a strangely happy mood. If she didn't know her brother best, she would have thought him besotted by a woman. But Nate would swoon over a finely placed star, if he had a mind to do so.

Since arriving back at Woodland Manor, she'd watched Nate with as much stealth as possible. She was determined to find a reason to make their parents disappointed in him, the way he'd done to her in London. Rationally, she knew he'd accidentally walked in on the moment between her and Mr. Swenson, but her rational mind wasn't always in charge of her actions.

She decided her best course of action would be to follow Nate through his days and discover a secret she could use against him. When the time came, she would reveal all to her parents, hope it was worth their notice, and they would take all focus off her.

"Kate, your father and I have discussed your current predicament." Her mother's words brought her back to the conversation in the room.

"What predicament?"

Words were not needed as everyone in the room, even the sniffing Diana, looked to her with impatience. Annoyed at the silent disapproval from all her siblings, she rolled her eyes.

"And what have you decided? Am I to stay in the country for the duration of the season?"

Norwood cleared his throat, placing his newspaper aside. "I have found you a match. The wedding will take place this spring."

"A match? With whom?" Kate knew her parents would be irrational, but forcing her into a marriage was worse than she could have imagined.

"Mr. Brandon Wells. He is the youngest son of Mr. Wells of Liverpool." Norwood folded his arms in apparent readiness for an argument.

"Brandon is a younger son. It will not do. I will not be married off in such a disrespectful manner and to a man unworthy of my notice."

“They are a respectable family, and you will marry him, or you will live in a cottage.”

“I will do no such thing.”

Norwood stood from his place near the fire allowing the newspaper to drop to the floor. “You will do as I tell you or you can find a new family to support you.”

“Does he know of my ruin?”

Norwood slowly retook his seat. She didn’t enjoy seeing her father in such a sensitive state. “He is aware. I have paid him handsomely for his sacrifice.”

“I do not see it as a sacrifice on his part. He is a plain man— looks like a frog. When he speaks, I should think a croak would escape instead of words. The connections I will bring to the marriage are far above his current Society.” Kate turned her nose up and folded her arms in disgust. The idea of being married to such a man was ludicrous.

“You seem to not realize the severity of your situation. The disgrace you brought upon your mother and I has somehow escaped your scandalous brain.”

It was difficult for Kate to admit to her parents that she was in the wrong. It shouldn’t have been hard, yet accepting her actions was a last priority. She first needed to find a way to pay Nate in kind and then she would beg for forgiveness. Once they could see she wasn’t the only one capable of scandal, all would be forgiven. She might not even have to marry the frog.

She only hoped Nate wouldn’t prove to disappoint. He was focused so deeply upon the study of astronomy that women weren’t an option for destroying his perfectly pleasing position as youngest son. Perhaps she could convince him to seek employment as a tutor or teacher. Entering such type of service would bring shame upon their family as they weren’t respectable positions.

“I should think you would have more concern for your sisters.” Her mother’s admonition caused a small amount of remorse to turn her cheeks pink. “Think of the intolerable situation you have put them in. Your father will have to find matches for each of them now that no respectable man in Society will have them.”

Unable to handle further censure, Kate stood and walked to the door. Diana’s sniffing was breaking her resolve for wickedness.



Kate peered into the dining room hoping to avoid further confrontation with Norwood. If by some miracle she could bypass both parents, it would be a wonderful start to her day. Unfortunately,

the earl and countess sat at the table eating the morning meal. Skulking outside the door, she held an internal debate on which would be worse: facing her parents or starvation.

“You cannot avoid them for long. The Isle of Wight is a small area in comparison to the rest of England.” Nate’s whisper caused her to turn and face her brother, or the enemy she vowed to destroy.

“I should think you would prefer to stay away from Diana until she has forgotten your slip of the tongue.”

“I am not afraid of her.”

Kate shook her head, the blonde curls dancing on the edges of her eyes. “Then why, my dear little brother, are you hiding in the hallway?”

“I am only here to discover your reason for creeping in the shadows.”

The imagery of his words left her thinking of the man her father intended her to marry. Although he’d said creep, she’d tied it to leap, and it took everything within to calm her nerves before lashing out. An internal reminder chimed before she said anything she’d regret. *He cannot know I am angry. It is to my advantage to keep him in the dark.*

If Nate discovered her vendetta, he would watch to make certain she couldn’t turn him into their parents for any wrongdoing. If the situation with Swenson didn’t fully warrant a vow of revenge, the alliance with Mr. Wells was more than enough to push her over the edge.

Taking Nate’s arm, Kate smiled up at her youngest brother who happened to be a head taller than she. Cheerfully she squeezed his arm. “Will you escort me in to break my fast?”

Morning came far too soon. Lilith wondered if looking at the

night sky was worth the lack of sleep as she pulled her cold feet out of bed and rushed to dress. With a few minutes to spare, she arrived in the kitchen to stoke the fire. Once she was certain everything was set in the range, she rushed out into the chilly morning air with a bucket to haul water for morning tea.

Pausing in the task would only make it last longer, but the exhaustion from the night's events quickly caught up as her arms ached and her legs tried to refuse movement. Again, she wondered if a view of the night sky was worth every bone in her body screaming for relief. *Of course, she thought, it might not be the late hour. I am still very new in my position. I have only worked a fortnight. Perhaps the fatigue is due to my chores.*

Entertaining this thought, she moved into the kitchen with another bucket of water.

"Good morning, Lilith." Mrs. Connolly's cheerful voice cleared the drudgery from her mind. "You look exhausted. Are you sleeping well?"

"I am not used to such chores. But I will be fine." Lilith's words escaped her mouth before she checked to see if they were alone. It was one part of being a servant she hadn't yet mastered.

Mrs. Bell, the housekeeper, stood from her place at the small table reviewing the daily tasks. Her belt jingled with the many keys she held and the chains dangling from her silver chatelaine. "If you put your mind to your tasks and actively seek joy in what you are doing, you will experience satisfaction in your work."

"Yes, Mrs. Bell." Lilith dared not look into the woman's eyes. She was kind enough, but as a career servant she didn't understand anything Lilith was going through.

The blisters from hauling water up and down the stairs to clean chamber pots would certainly never heal. Mrs. Connolly claimed they would, but Lilith feared her hands would bear the burden of this change in circumstance far longer than predicted by the cook.

"Put your mind in your tasks and do not leave work for the

morrow if you can accomplish it today.”

“Yes, Mrs. Bell.”

“If you have taken enough rest, hop to it. The sun will be up before you realize, and the chamber pots will not empty themselves.”

Lilith rushed toward the servants’ stairs hoping the well-meaning reproach was over. Chamber pots were the worst of her duties, especially when the waste stuck to the sides of the porcelain container. She was required to empty the pots in each room occupied by a female servant. Her daily tasks usually kept her busy enough to think of only the next chore, but as she washed each pot with the foul-smelling, vinegar rag, she thought of the man she’d encountered the night before. His name was Nate. She wondered where he lived and why he had been out so late. She wondered if he was married, and then brushed the errant thought away. *A man in his circumstances will not care for a scullery maid.*

With the pots completed, she scrubbed her hands until the dry cracks reopened, and blood emerged. Taking care of human waste not only made her ill, but she needed to know her hands were clean, if only for her sanity, before moving to her next duty.

From dawn until dusk, Lilith worked. Every time she made a mistake, or stopped to take a break, she’d remember the words Mrs. Bell said about finding happiness in her position. If a person could make this type of work pleasurable, Lilith was certain it could be her.

After another day of chores, she dragged her tired body back up to her chamber, Lilith lay on the bed in her uniform instead of changing into a night rail. After the day she had, she’d go straight to sleep. Certain of this, she kicked off her shoes and lay on her side, not caring about the blanket. She closed her eyes waiting for the comfort of sleep, but her mind trailed off to Nate. The nagging curiosity of his circumstances kept her mind from closing out the day.

*Who is he?* She tried singing a song to remove the man from her mind, but he lingered in the shadows, and when the song trailed away and she nearly dipped into sleep, his offer to escort her home brought her back from unconsciousness.

Sitting up she hit her fists against the pillow to plump it up. “Morning will come far too soon for this kind of distraction.”

She lay back down and closed her eyes to find after a full day of hard work she wanted nothing more than to walk down the same path as the previous night and find Nate. She could even venture out to the clearing. She wanted to speak with him and discover more about him.

“This is ridiculous. I cannot have another late outing. What if he is not even out there?”

These questions should have made her lay back down and attempt sleep, but they didn’t. Instead, she rushed to the wardrobe and

removed her second day dress. She had brought two. These relics from her past brought a bit of humanity back to her life.

Feeling a renewal of energy with the excitement of possibly meeting Nate again, Lilith bounded down the stairs and stopped in her rush as Mrs. Bell, Mr. Jensen, and Mrs. Connolly sat at the table with a pot of tea.

"Where are you off to at this hour?" Mrs. Connolly's inquisitive smile made heat rise in Lilith's cheeks.

"The night sky is clear of clouds. I thought I would take a walk through the orchard."

Mr. Jensen raised his eyebrows in suspicion. "You had to put on a different dress for this?"

It wasn't his business what she wore, especially since her chores were finished and she had time before it was considered too late to be out. But the question made her uneasy. Would they find her desire to feel human and be a part of her old world frivolous? Would it cost her the position and the resulting wages?

"I think you look lovely. If I were younger, I'd be out there hoping to find a husband," Mrs. Connolly laughed, breaking the tension and bringing a smile to everyone's faces.

"I do not plan to find a husband. I hope to view the stars. I so enjoy them."

"Hurry up! The hour will not wait for your dawdling." Mrs. Bell's smile told her the jaunt into the night was approved.

As she left, she pulled the door closed. Mr. Jensen's words flowed out with the warmth and hit her as blatantly as the cold night air.

"Poor girl is struggling to find her place here. I do not think she will last long."

When Lilith took the position as scullery maid, she made certain to keep her past a secret. She didn't want pity. She needed to support her mother and sisters. One day she hoped her younger sisters would marry well, then she and her mother could live comfortably together in their little cottage. Until that time, Lilith had to keep her position.

She would do better to ignore the pain in her hands and the offending smell of the slops. Over time she would build strength while carrying water. And each morning she would set the fire with precision and serve the other servants as required. But she hoped the little time between work and sleep could be kept as her indulgence back to what once was. She had given up far too much to ignore the stars. For now, she only wanted this part of her old life back. Holding onto it shouldn't require her to give up her position.

Lilith made plans as she crossed to the apple orchard. She didn't have enough time to walk down to the sea or to find the clearing, since she'd wasted time attempting sleep. The moon, a bit lower in the

sky than the night before, hung perfectly between the branches of the trees. A desire to paint entered her mind, but she pushed it aside. That life was over, and she could no longer afford the supplies to indulge in such activities.

Lilith wandered through the trees in a crisscross pattern, enjoying the freedom of her night. She thought about Nate and entertained another meeting with him. Remembering the tall, handsome man left her with a smile. She wanted to know more about him. She needed to find out if he was married. For if he was, the fairytale she conjured in her mind would need to end.

The sound of waves crashing against the shore brought her back to the hour. She'd imagined her way much farther out than she'd originally planned. Turning to go back to Woodland Manor, Lilith stopped as the man who'd occupied her mind the whole of the day stood before her.

"I hoped I would find you out here tonight."

She wondered if her legs would work, for her mind wasn't registering the ground. Her heart thumped loudly as she looked into his gray-blue eyes. Her mouth hung open in a very unladylike manner.

"Miss Bradley, I apologize for shocking you again. I endeavor to stop causing you distress."

Finding her voice, she stopped gawking. "I did not expect to see you again."

"I assumed you would not mind. If it is a bother, I will leave you to your solitude."

"No." The strangled word flew from her mouth as heat rushed into her face. "I only thought there was a possibility you are married and would not wish to see me again."

Those were not the words she meant to say. But now they were out of her mouth, there would need to be a response from him or a clarification from her. But how to clarify? What excuse could be used to hide the intent behind her words?

"I am not married. I believe I am far too young for such a pursuit at this time."

"Oh?"

"Yes, but my mother does not agree."

"No?"

"No. She believes her children are neglectful of their duty to provide grandchildren."

Lilith found herself smiling at his words. He was either jesting or his mother was like all the women amongst the *ton*. "Are you in earnest?"

"Yes. Very much so."

He pointed to the path, and Lilith fell instep beside him. She was

thankful he kept his hands behind his back instead of offering his arm.

“How many siblings do you have?”

“There are quite a lot of us. My parents married young and saw to their familial duties.”

Lilith looked up at him and smiled. “Another one of your mother’s reminders?”

“Yes. She is full of advice on this subject.”

“Are all of your siblings unmarried?”

“No. And she will have two grandchildren. My eldest brother and his wife are expecting, and my youngest sister and her husband have one child. But that is not enough for my mother.”

He looked down at her as he spoke and their eyes locked. She wondered if the flutter of her heart could be dangerous; when he smiled, she worried her breathing would stop.

“Miss Bradley, tell me about your family. From where do you hail?”

“My ancestral home is in Somerset.”

“Siblings?”

“Yes, I have two sisters. Both are younger than me.”

“They must be very young, for you cannot be a day over sixteen.”

Lilith blushed. “Eighteen.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I would never have guessed. Why have I not seen you in London?”

“I cannot say.”

She didn’t want to tell him of her misfortune. Her lack of an introduction to Society. Her entire life had been focused on a curtsy before the queen and the first invitation to Almack’s, and then one day it was all gone.

“Is your family on the isle?”

“No. My mother and sisters live in a cottage.”

“Why are you not with them?”

The information she shared past this point would destroy the fabric of this budding relationship. She didn’t want him to know she was in service. There would be no way this could go beyond friendship, but her pride wouldn’t allow him to know she was a lowly, scullery maid.

“I am visiting my aunt and uncle.”

“Do I know your relations?”

“I am unaware, sir.”

She was caught. If he asked for the name of the family she visited, there wouldn’t be anyone on the isle with that name. Could he know everyone? But he would know the people who lived close by and that would be disastrous.



He chuckled. "I meant to ask for their names."

"I call them Aunt and Uncle."

He looked shocked. "Do you intend to keep their identities a secret?"

Lilith fumbled for something to say. She could give him her Aunt and Uncle Bradley's names, but they were not living on the Isle of Wight. Nor were Aunt and Uncle Clifton. After that, she was out of names.

"Yes."

Nate laughed. "I love it when a woman is skilled at intrigue. At some point, I will earn your confidence. Until then, you may keep your secret."

She let out a sigh of relief. The cold night and the stressful conversation about her family left her drained. "I must go home now."

"Now? I suppose it is late. May I escort you?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

Lilith backed away as an excuse came to her mind. "If I allow you to walk with me, you will discover who my aunt and uncle are."

Without allowing him to respond, Lilith turned and ran back the way she'd come. It took longer than it should have because she went through the orchard, but when she finally opened the door to the kitchen and snuck into the empty space, a smile lit across her face.

Nate wanted to know about her. As she climbed the stairs to her lonely chamber and undressed for the night, she hummed the tune to a song she had once played on the piano. There weren't any words, so she simply hummed until she fell into a deep, contented sleep.

Nate smiled as he found the periodical sitting on the table and

exited the house without his mother's notice. He hoped Lilith was out viewing the night sky for the third time. It was obvious to him she had an interest in astronomy. Women didn't leave the safety of home to wander and look at stars without such an interest— at least he hoped he was right.

Each step took him closer to the spot she'd entered the woods. He wanted to show her the clearing and talk about the interesting information astronomers were writing. But with each step, he worried she would find him boring. Pushing his spectacles up on his nose, he lamented his lack of the masculine virtues women found dashing. Most women wanted to know where the North Star was located and then they'd ask about constellations. He could answer those questions, but it was the deep understanding and love of the unknown he hoped to find in a woman.

When women found out he wanted to speak of mathematical equations, black holes, atmospheric gasses, and pressure, all interest was gone. He could brandish a sword as well as his brothers, ride a horse with ease, and play cards and billiards, but women looked past those abilities and considered him bookish when he wore his spectacles and spoke of science.

As he rounded the bend, he saw Lilith exiting the clump of trees.

"Miss Bradley, I hoped to find you here."

"Nate." She nodded her head, then tilted it to the side. "I only just realized, I do not know a formal address for you. It is inappropriate for me to refer to you with your Christian name."

He considered her request, then decided if she could keep her secrets, he needed to have a few of his own. "Would it be easier if I address you as Lilith?"

"No, it would not."

"Then we must continue on the way we are." He smiled to let her know he found the entire situation pleasant. "I wonder if you would allow me to show you the clearing. It is another fine evening, and the view is lovely."

He waited, holding his breath as she considered the request.

“Yes. I would like that very much.”

It didn’t take long to travel off the road into the trees. He’d been to the place many times, as his father owned a cottage within the clearing. Guiding Miss Bradley to his favorite spot, he held out the periodical in hopes she would appreciate the volume of information within.

“What is this?”

“A scientific periodical. I subscribed over a year ago and this is the latest edition.”

Miss Bradley looked up into his eyes and smiled. “This is wonderful.”

“It is?” Taken aback by her immediate excitement, Nate held in his joy so as not to overwhelm her.

“My father subscribed to this same periodical.”

She’d used the word *periodical* which sent Nate into rapture. The smile he’d previously hidden spread across his face. When he’d first met Miss Lilith Bradley, he’d hoped she would be different from other women, now this suspicion had been confirmed. No woman of his acquaintance had ever cared about scientific periodicals. They’d look at the book and lament the lack of fashion within the pages. He cringed at even thinking of women viewing such a fine piece of science as a simple magazine.

“He used to read to our family at night. I loved sitting in the library listening to the theories of each astronomer.” Her voice trailed off as she flipped through the latest edition.

Silently watching her face brighten with each page, Nate wondered if he’d found a woman to court. Of course, it would have to be a long courtship as he had no intention of marrying at his age.

“Have you read it?” She held the periodical out giving it back.

“Yes. You are welcome to take it with you.”

“You would not mind?”

“Not at all. If it is not too much to ask, can we discuss the information once you have had time to read?”

“I would be delighted.”

Nate locked eyes with Miss Bradley, and for a moment wondered if the interaction they’d shared would be enough to use her Christian name. But he decided not to ask again so soon. She needed to trust him before such a liberty could be taken. He wanted to find something of interest to speak of and nervously blurted out the first thought to enter his mind.

“I think it is quite an achievement for Miss Caroline Herschel to work alongside her brother in the Astronomical Society. King George was right to appoint them both to the work. Did you know they hail

from Germany?"

"Hanover. Yes, I did."

Nate inwardly grumbled. He wondered how much she knew about astronomy. His simple facts sounded boring. "Did you know she was instrumental in the discovery of comets and the mathematical position of Uranus?"

Miss Bradley looked up from the periodical she cradled in her hands. "I did."

Palms sweating, he hoped to find something to say that would encourage further conversation. "Have you ever had the chance to look through a telescope?"

"It seems a very long time since I have. My father had one in his library, and it was well used by both of us."

Nate wanted to reach out and take her hand, but it would be far too forward for their current level of acquaintance. "When you return home, will it be to your father?"

"No. He passed away last year."

"I am sorry to hear this."

Miss Bradley stood, clutching the periodical as if he would grab it away. "Thank you for bringing me here. I will only have the articles a short time."

"Take as much time as you need. There is no rush."

As she turned to leave him in the clearing, Nate reached out and took her elbow. "Please, promise you will meet me here tomorrow night?"

"I cannot."

"Why?"

"I have a previous engagement."

He nodded remembering the musical his mother arranged. "Now that you mention it, I do as well. Meet me the following evening?"

Miss Bradley agreed, and before he could offer to escort her home, she was running back the way they'd walked through the trees. Nate thought about following her, but decided the intrigue of not knowing was quite alluring.

Instead, he sat back in the tall grass and looked up at the stars. One day, he hoped very soon, he would show Lilith Bradley the telescope in his father's library. They could spend an entire evening discussing black holes, planets, and asteroids. He had a feeling Lilith wouldn't be interested in what some women called shooting stars.

Kate tried to tiptoe behind Nate as he escaped the house, but after tripping in a rut on the pathway and damaging her slipper, she realized he was completely focused on his destination. Stealth could wait until she needed to use it. Noticing the magazine in his hand, she nearly turned back until she realized he was meeting someone. Upon closer examination, Kate saw a woman waiting by the side of the road, and the girl looked happy to see Kate's foolish brother.

"Well done, Nate. A respectable woman does not meet a man at night."

With a smile born of intrigue, Kate changed her mind about the shocking information she would give her parents. She wouldn't convince Nate to find a profession, she would find out what this clandestine assignation was, and report on it at the most inconvenient time for her brother.

Nate and his tryst had no reason to believe they were being followed, so Kate stayed far enough behind to not be heard, but close enough she could follow. As they sat in the clearing, Kate inched close enough to hear the conversation. Rolling her eyes toward the heavens, she nearly jumped out and chided her brother for his very unromantic flirtations. Did Miss Bradley care about astronomy?

Kate's legs ached the following morning as she slowly walked down to break her fast. Crouching behind trees on the outskirts of the clearing for over an hour had taken a toll on her legs. If she wasn't trying to be secretive, she'd speak to her youngest brother about his inability to woo women. It hadn't surprised her when Miss Bradley ran away. All Kate had to show for her evening was a ruined pair of slippers and the dull information of science.

Without thought, Kate filled her plate and sat at the end of the table. She planned to spend her day pondering the information she had on Nate. She needed to find out who Miss Bradley was and why this woman would spend her evenings sitting in a clearing.

"Kate, you will be in the parlor all day?" Norwood's unexpected question took her thoughts away from the confusion of Nate's secret meeting.

She didn't have any reason not to ponder the situation with Nate in another room of the house, so she nodded her head in agreement. The parlor would do for her plotting against her younger brother.

"Is there a reason you need me in the parlor?"

"Mr. Wells and his family will arrive today. They will spend the rest of the year at Woodland Manor." Knowing her father, she wasn't surprised when he added his final statement. "You will show them the respect they deserve."

Defying her father would do no good, so she acquiesced to his demands and waited for her intended to arrive. The slow ticking of the clock pulled her thoughts away from Nate and his lady as each measured click filled her soul with dread. Perhaps she had finally pushed the earl too far. He'd never forced her into an engagement before. This was unprecedented territory, and she wasn't certain how to react or end the charade.

As her father entered the parlor with their guests, Kate stood as was expected. She watched as Mr. Wells's forced smile took up the majority of his face. His cheeks were puffy and the warts along his hairline sent a shiver down her spine. She'd silently took in each physical aspect of the man standing across the room. He'd be almost charming if not for his similarities to a frog.

She wouldn't marry the man and she would make her demands known in proper timing. With a curtsy, she cringed as Mr. Wells took her hand and left a wet kiss. She'd experienced moments of discomfort, but this was by far the worst. Wells lingered with his lips upon her hand until his father touted a ghastly throat clearing and jarred his son into action.

"Lady Kate." Wells's smile somehow went wider, his lips thinning to where she couldn't see the change in tone between his face and mouth. "Thank you for the kind invitation to visit with your family over the holiday."

He'd said the last word with a sensuous pleasure leaving Kate ashamed. His tone reminded her of hours spent with men who had ill intentions toward her virtue. But never had she wanted to escape their grasp. She'd put herself in those moments.

"Wells," Norwood said, stepping close to her in what she could only determine was a protective shield. "We will discuss the particulars of this agreement at another time. This first meeting and the next few months will be a period of familiarity."

Kate hoped her father was not serious. Had he not seen the disgusting way Mr. Wells approached her? Had he not seen Wells's attempt at an alluring gaze upon her face as he approached? Had his anger blinded him to the imprudent match?

She'd long ago stopped praying but suddenly found an urge to

renew solicitations to the Almighty in hopes of escaping this horrid plan. Norwood wouldn't force her into a marriage with such a man. With this hope brightening her heart, she moved back to the sofa and sat in stunned silence until it was time to dress for supper.

In her bedchamber she knelt for the first time since her governess stopped forcing her to say nighttime prayers. In a quiet but vocal tone, Kate whispered the only words she could think, which came out irreverent. "What the deuce is my father thinking? He cannot want such an ugly man for his daughter. Please, find a way to strike my father or Mr. Wells down if they continue upon this path."

With a stern amen and a bob of her head, Kate stood and pulled the bell cord to summon her maid so she could dress for supper. She would find a way to thwart her father in this plan. The sudden realization of having two attacks set for her winter was a bit tiring. She still had to attack Nate and now she considered a vendetta against her father. She'd need rest if she were to accomplish everything before spring.

With the periodical hidden under her pillow, Lilith left for the kitchen to assist Mrs. Connolly with the baking. Lord and Lady Norwood expected a house full of guests, which added to everyone's workload. Her mind ached to read even a portion of one article. The mathematics of astronomy was beyond her abilities, but it didn't matter; when her father spoke of the equations, it had filled her soul with pleasure. She hoped a conversation with Nate would be the same.

She loved to think about people exploring the galaxy through a circular tube from earth. The first telescope her father brought home had seen a great deal of use. Before leaving her ancestral home, she'd hoped at least one telescope could be taken with them to the cottage, but it hadn't been possible. She wondered if her Uncle Bradley and his wife found use for the instruments or if they sat dormant. She shouldn't think of him as Uncle Bradley, as he now had her father's title, but it hurt too much to consider anyone else using it.

"Where is that head of yours?" Mrs. Connolly's question pulled her out of the silent reverie.

"Hmm?"

"You've overworked the yeast out of the dough. It won't prove correctly. You'll have to start over."

Lilith looked down at the sticky mess in her hands. Without question, the dough was a mess. "Oh goodness!"

"You look to be wool gathering. What has you so preoccupied?"

Lilith wanted to confide in Mrs. Connolly, and she would have, if not for Gwen and Ella. Both girls looked up expectantly ready for gossip.

"It is nothing. I apologize for making such a mess. I will start over."

Gwen smirked. "Little Miss High-and-Mighty can't have too many cares. Worst she's got to deal with is the slops."

Since the moment Lilith arrived at Woodland Manor, Gwen smarted off every time she entered the room. It bothered Lilith, only because she'd hoped to make friends with the other maids. She was



now a part of this world, and to survive she needed to accustom herself to their ways.

“Thinks she’s better than us with her refined speech.” Gwen continued to mutter. “It doesn’t matter to me how prettily the words come out. At the end of the day, she’s still the one who takes care of the Irish wedding each morning.”

Having heard the complaints many times, Lilith chose to ignore the rude behavior and start over on her assignment. Bread wasn’t difficult to make, unless she allowed her mind to wander.

“And who are you to be talking?” Mrs. Connolly stirred a bowl of cake batter, eyebrows raised and disgust pulling at the edges of her lips. “You perform the Irish wedding for each member of the household every morning. Their excrement smells the same as yours.”

Lilith smiled in appreciation as Gwen’s mouth dropped. Referring to the chamber pot as an Irish wedding wasn’t appropriate in any circumstance and the term caused the Irish chef more than a bit of heartburn each time it was said.

Gwen glared at Mrs. Connolly. “Better to be changing out the master’s pot than that of a servant. When I write home, I can tell my family I actually see the earl and countess on a daily basis. They happen to know my name. Lilith can’t say as much. All that refinement and no one to show it off to.”

The rebuke stung, but only because it was true. There was a time when maids would curtsy to her or hide their faces in the corners to look invisible as she’d walked by. It was difficult not to let the melancholy of her new circumstances take over, especially when Gwen reminded her of the lowly station she now occupied. Hardening her emotions, so tears wouldn’t flow, Lilith tried to push away the bitterness before it took hold.

Lilith had spent years at Mrs. Lyndell’s finishing school for ladies only to end up a scullery maid. Life wasn’t fair. If it were, her father wouldn’t have died. She’d have a brother to inherit their home and fortune, and instead of living in a run-down cottage, her mother and sisters would be safe in their ancestral home. Pushing thoughts of her family aside, Lilith turned away to search for salt and gather her wits.

There was a time such comments would have put her into tears. There wasn’t a need for tears any longer. She’d spent the last year crying herself to sleep each time she allowed the sting of longing for one more day with her father to pierce her thoughts. One more conversation about planets and stars. One more night as a family, talking over seemingly mundane items that meant everything when it was no longer discussed.

And then the day came when she’d realized the friends she’d spent hours shopping and planning for their debut before the royal courts no

longer cared for her Society due to her lack of funds; this was what finally dulled all emotions. At that point, all feeling had to be pushed aside if she were to survive life in a cottage. She would never be able to go back to her old life, and it was best to leave the fair-weathered friends along with the emotions, behind. That was the point where her body stopped producing tears over useless comments from people who didn't matter.

Mrs. Bell entered the kitchen in a flurry of nerves, pulling Lilith out of the last strands of the memories of her old life. "Guests are arriving. The full complement is expected."

Lilith stood and wiped her hands on her apron. She was still new to the position and wasn't certain when her presence was or wasn't needed.

"Not you. Scullery maids are too bracket-faced to greet guests." Gwen guffawed with delight at the shock from Lilith.

When the maids were finally gone, and Mrs. Connolly was the only one left with her in the kitchen, Lilith looked to the woman for support.

"What can I do to help Gwen like me? Ella refuses to speak to me for fear she will incur Gwen's wrath."

Mrs. Connolly poured the cake batter into tins. "There isn't much you can do to change another person's way of thinking. Gwen is a sour, angry woman. She won't soften even if you try."

"I was hoping for a bit of advice."

"My advice, young lady, is to keep your nose clean." Mrs. Connolly turned away and placed the cake pans in the oven.

Lilith thought about staying silent, but she needed to tell someone of the possible friend she had in Nate. He was kind and interested in astronomy. More than anything though, he wanted to speak with her.

"It would be nice to have the other maids as friends, but I do not need them. I think I may have another friend."

"And who might this be?"

"A young man I met while looking at the stars. He is well versed and does not treat me with contempt."

"A footman? Charlie's been eyeing you since you arrived. Stay away from him. He's bad news."

"No. Charlie is a menace."

"Who then?"

She didn't know why, but she wasn't ready to share his name. "It isn't important."

"What does this young man speak of when he is with you?"

"He loves astronomy, as much or possibly more than I do."

Mrs. Connolly gave her a long, appraising look. "You be careful. Most men aren't out to prattle on like a nervous debutante. If he tries

anything, kick him good and hard so he can't walk."

Lilith blushed as she considered the warning. Hoping Nate would never treat her with such callous contempt, she nodded to let the chef know she understood what to do if needed. When it was finally time to go back to her chambers, Lilith pulled the long-awaited periodical out from its hiding place and opened to the first page. With her night clothing on and the blanket tucked neatly around her body, she kept the candle burning a bit longer than usual so she could read.

Nate wore his spectacles to the musical, if only to dissuade women from serious flirting. Even if their mothers pushed the women toward him, one look at his unfashionable, wide-lensed spectacles would end the conversation.

“Mother is displeased with your appearance this evening.” Samuel didn’t have to point to his face for Nate to know the context. “One would think you have no desire to find a wife.”

“Our mother has enough daughters to marry off. Can she not focus on them?”

“With Kate’s latest scandal, it is top priority. Word traveled from London much faster than expected. It will be a long time before anyone forgets her ruin.”

“What do you think of Mr. Wells?” Nate wondered how long their father would continue the attempt at a match for Kate with the man.

“He seems nice. Kate needs to calm down where he is concerned. He will make her a good husband, if she will stop acting like such a brat. But if not, he resides in Liverpool. We will see them but a few times each year and only hear of Kate’s wrath through the post.” Samuel’s words were of such a serious nature that they forced a humorless chuckle from Nate.

“Perhaps father should send for a match abroad. An American wouldn’t be a terrible choice and they do not frown upon scandal as we do.” Nate wanted to visit the former colonies. Perhaps this could be his opportunity. “I would be happy to assist in the cause.”

Samuel quirked an eyebrow and laughed. “Oh, mother will be pleased to know you want to leave the country. It will give her time to find you a wife and have her waiting upon your return.”

Nate grumbled. “I am twenty years old. Still too young for such a situation. Why does she not work on Leigh? He is five years my senior and far worse off than I when it comes to flirting.”

“Leigh is intelligent enough to not wear spectacles to any party. He also spends his time speaking with the available women and their mothers.”

Nate looked around the room until he found Leigh. Samuel was

correct. Leigh stood in a group of debutantes engaging in conversation, laughing when appropriate, and taking notice of none of them.

"I do not have the ability to be so pleasing. I would prefer to be in the library on my own."

"Or out among the stars and moon?" Samuel knew him too well. "Tell me, Nate, what has taken you out the last three nights? Is a comet predicted?"

"No." He knew Samuel would not break a confidence, and so he pressed forward with the thoughts plaguing his mind. "I admit there is a far sweeter inducement to my nighttime wanderings."

"Do tell."

Nate smiled in a bit of embarrassment. "A Miss Bradley. I have seen her three times. She is as interested in astronomy as I."

"Is she here? I want to meet the woman who has managed to turn my youngest brother's eye."

Nate shook his head. "No. I admit I find it perplexing. I thought everyone who was not already in town received an invitation to this party. Perhaps mother missed a neighbor?"

"We are not yet acquainted with the family who let Seafield Park."

"I was unaware of a new family. When did they arrive?"

"Only the week before you returned from town."

Nate considered the possibility. Seafield Park was within walking distance. It made sense, and so he found it fully possible Lilith's home was with this new family.

"I will allow Miss Bradley to retain her secret, for now. She is most intriguing."

Samuel chuckled and patted him on the shoulder. "Words like *intriguing* will find a way to cause a great deal of trouble, if you let it. Be careful, Nate."

Rolling his eyes at his brother's comment, Nate slipped out of the party and found his way to the library. He thought about the quiet qualities of Lilith Bradley. She seemed to be an observer of nature, science, and life. If she had attended the musical, he was certain she would have found her way out of the bustle of conversation to a quiet corner.

His mind ached to know what she thought of the periodical. It was rare for him to have someone knowledgeable in astronomy to speak with, and it was tempting to find his way out to the meadow to see if she were there. As he considered this, a moment of doubt crept in and he entertained thoughts of Miss Bradley, Lilith, laughing over his foolish assumption of handing her a periodical.

He thought of the way he'd looked at Miss Bradley and the attraction he'd experienced, then fought back the internal

embarrassment. It was useless to think about it. The situation had passed. If he'd played the fool, she would keep his periodical and he'd never meet with her again.

Standing near the telescope, Nate hoped one day he could show it to Lilith. Although he barely knew her, she had taken place of all his errant thoughts. The Astronomical Society, mapping the stars, and the goal of discovering a new planet were pushed to the back of his mind now that he'd allowed Lilith Bradley to take up residence in his thoughts.

Kate sat in the corner glaring at her father and Mr. Wells throughout the entire musical. She entertained thoughts of one or both of the men suffering agonizing pain. It wasn't kind of her, but upon her father's demise, Samuel would oversee her future and he wouldn't allow Mr. Wells or any other imprudent match for her.

For a short agonizing moment, she imagined herself as the wife of Mr. Wells. It was far more than she could bear. Waking each morning with a husband such as he would prove her endurance. She'd take Mr. Swenson, her erstwhile partner in crime as a husband before the frog, but then she remembered that he was already married.

"Glaring will not make him disappear." Diana leaned into her and whispered so as not to be overheard. "Can you not speak to father and convince him of your repentance?"

Kate turned her loathing eyes toward her sister. "He loves you more than me. I am but the middle daughter who has caused him more grief than a man should have in a lifetime."

"Father will listen. You must approach him when he has not received distressing news."

"What do you mean?"

"I only mean he is still incensed by your ill-advised behavior. Give him time to soften and then convince him to find you a more suitable match."

"You mean a man without warts?"

"And thin, frog lips. How should you kiss such a man?"

Kate genuinely smiled for the first time since Nate interrupted her assignation in the library. "I am thankful there is at least one person in this family on my side."

Diana squeezed Kate's arm. "I do not approve of your behavior. But you are my sister and I stand ready to argue for your future. Father cannot mean to tie our family to Wells."

Kate allowed her mind to wander as she considered Diana's support. It was typical of her eldest sister to find a positive spin on the situation. As she looked around the room, she noticed Nate slipping out the side door. She needed to follow him. The Miss Bradley he'd

met the night before was glaringly absent at the musical. She wondered what would have kept a lady from attending a party at the home of an earl.

A break in performances allowed her to make an escape. She slipped through the same exit her brother had only moments before and reached for the door to the terrace as a voice cleared behind her.

“Where are you off to?”

Kate turned to find her father standing in the doorway between the rooms with the guests and the empty library with the outdoor escape.

“I needed a bit of fresh air. The music room is overwhelming.”

“You are not to leave the house at night without an escort. I will have Mr. Wells accompany you.”

“Father, can we not come to an arrangement? I do not want to marry a man who is covered in warts.” She decided to exaggerate his most detestable feature and pray her father would see her side.

“You brought this on yourself, Kate. I cannot pretend your actions do not have consequences. I have indulged you far too long. I will not yield.”

“If only you would consider the imprudent connection it will make with our family. He is far worse than Mr. Baker was. You are thankful Rilla is widowed now.”

“What a terrible comment to make. I would never wish such a fate upon any of my children.”

“Yet you would bind me to a man I do not want to marry for the sake of avoiding scandal?”

“If you desire to walk on the terrace, Mr. Wells will have to accompany you.” Her father motioned to Mr. Wells and Kate knew she’d lost the battle.

Unable to formulate further argument, she allowed Mr. Wells to open the door and provide himself as an escort. He held his arm out, but she chose not to accept. Instead, Kate put her hands behind her back as she walked.

“Did you have a destination in mind?” Mr. Wells seemed happy to follow her lead. She wondered if it were possible to lose him in the orchard, but then remembered it was autumn and the leaves had fallen from the trees.

“No, I only wondered what had happened to my brother. I am concerned about him.”

“Which brother?”

Kate looked to Mr. Wells, formulating an alternative to her plan. “I worry about him so. Poor Nate.”

“Is he ill? Has something happened?”

“Nothing of the sort.” She had to play her part well. If she did, she could get rid of Mr. Wells and have her revenge on Nate before



Twelfth Night.

“Will you confide in me?”

Mr. Wells’s need to please Kate left her excited. If she was forced to marry the man, she would use him to do her bidding for the rest of her life.

“It is only his incessant need to be outdoors. I worry he will catch his death from the cold.”

Mr. Wells stopped walking. “Do you consider me a fool?”

“Of course not.”

It was a lie. She detested the man and considered him one of the most foolish men in England. To agree to marry a ruined woman for money only proved his insensibilities.

“I am told Nathaniel enjoys a nightly view of the sky. He is perfectly fine. You, being his sister, should know this about him.”

“Yes, I do. But it still does not account for the ever-increasing chill of the evening. What if he falls prey to bandits while out so late?”

“If you are in earnest, I will discuss the situation with your brother. I will let him know he is distressing you.”

“No. No. Such solicitations will not be necessary. I only thought you could keep watch on him. He is younger than us both. If you were to stay back and keep watch...”

Kate hoped he would finish her thought, but he didn’t. Instead, Mr. Wells turned back to Woodland Manor and stepped away from her.

“When you decide to have a decent conversation with me, I will be ready. I will not pretend to believe a word of your foolish requests.”

Neither of them spoke as he escorted her back to the manor. Instead, she spent the beautiful, autumn evening listening to Mr. Wells whistling and wondering where Nate had escaped to and if he was with Miss Bradley.

Unable to carry a tune, Mr. Wells tortured her hearing with a high-pitched rendition of a song she was certain he made up in the moment. Each time the whistling squealed in her ears, Kate’s entire body shook with rage. She vowed to rid herself of the man.

Half days as a servant were all she had to look forward to, until meeting Nate. As it was Wednesday, Lilith dawned one of her day dresses and a pelisse hoping to spend her time away from servitude pleasantly engaged in the periodical.

Since receiving it a few nights previously, she'd had the opportunity to read through three articles. Hoping to study the rest of the booklet, she left for the apple orchard. A day sitting under the trees was the perfect midweek break.

"Dressed in her finest, again." Gwen's taunt sounded through the trees as Lilith found the perfect spot to rest. "One would think she planned to make morning visits."

With an attempt to ignore the jab, Lilith opened her periodical and looked over the next article on Copernicus and his contributions to science. Hoping to drown out the oration from Gwen, Lilith whispered the words. "One of Nicolaus Copernicus's greatest contributions to astronomy is the theory of the sun as a fixed point in space. Copernicus believed all other heavenly spheres, including the earth, were in constant orbit around the sun."

"What do we have here?" Gwen snatched the periodical from her hands and held it aloft.

Standing to retrieve the item, Lilith tried to take it back. "Give me my booklet."

"Where did you get this? Did you steal it out of the earl's library?"

Lilith could spend her day denying the allegations, or she could rationally find a way to retrieve the periodical. Instead of continuing her fruitless actions of grabbing for the book, she stepped back. "You know I am not allowed on the upper floors."

"I saw this exact magazine when I was dusting. If it isn't there now, then it means you stole it."

Refusing to allow Gwen to win the argument, Lilith retook her seat. "If you would like to borrow my periodical, you need only ask. I should think a bit of learning would do you some good."

Gwen rolled her eyes in frustration and looked to Ella. "What do you make of this? Little Miss Priss thinks she can fool us."

It was disappointing to hear Ella's nervous twitching laugh. She was obviously uncomfortable. But even this knowledge didn't soften Lilith's heart toward the woman. Gwen might be overbearing, but if someone were to stand up to the maid and tell her to stop torturing Lilith, it might be the only way to stop the bullying.

"I do not care to fool you. If you would like, I can teach you to read. That is assuming you never learned."

Instead of answering or accepting Lilith's offer, Gwen threw the periodical to the ground and stomped on the cover. "I don't care for your attitude. I am higher in station than you within the house. You better mind your sass. It might get you in trouble one of these days."

Retrieving the periodical, Lilith brushed the dirt away. Instead of staying for more torture, she stood and left the orchard. It was a pity, as the smell of the apple orchard was soothing and lovely. Lilith made her way to the clearing hoping she could find a bit of peace and time to continue reading.

She sat resting her back against a rock with her legs crossed while reading the rest of the article on Copernicus. The illustration on the side of the article drew her attention and she lifted the book closer to read each individual label.

"Perhaps I should loan you my spectacles."

Lilith turned and, before checking herself, she gleefully shouted. "Nate! How long have you stood there?"

Her excitement to see him filled her entire body. She had missed Nate and their conversations, even if they didn't speak about much. Being near him made her happy. She could forget about all her worries when Nate was nearby. It was strange to think of him as a friend, but that was exactly what he was. She could confide her love of astronomy in him, but that was all. She needed to remember that although he was a friend, she had to stay guarded.

"I only just arrived to find you perusing the article on Copernicus. Did you find it interesting?"

"Terribly so. I did not realize there are only seven-and-twenty observations attributed to Copernicus."

Nate sat next to her with excitement showing on his face. "With all of the amazing discoveries, I find it hard to believe he recorded so few."

"Perhaps it is an error?"

"No. I did further research in my father's library. It is accurate."

"Does your father have a great number of books?"

"Ever so many. I should think you would enjoy perusing the walls."

Lilith held up the periodical. "This is enough, for now."

"You still do not want to tell me anything about you?"

“I would prefer not to.”

She looked away as his questioning gaze penetrated the barriers she hoped to keep between them. It was fine to have friends, but giving further information was beyond her current capabilities. How could she admit to anyone the life she had turned to live? If there had been time, perhaps she could have found a position as governess, but without references, such positions passed her by.

“Miss Bradley, I would like to consider you a friend. Can we not speak of astronomy along with bits of who we are as people?”

“I already consider you to be my friend. But perhaps you would not like me, once you know everything about me.”

Nate shook his head and took hold of her hand. “I do not see such a possibility. The moment I met you, I knew my life would change for the better.”

Desiring the comfort of another human, she didn’t pull away. It had been far too long since anyone had touched her. Even through her gloves she found her hands tingling and a nervous flutter building in her chest. She would need to end this flirtation before it was out of hand.

“Whatever shall we do?” As the words exited her mouth, she regretted them. His knowledge of her current situation was completely useless.

“We can start by allowing me to court you.”

It was too much. Courting involved riding in a carriage through the countryside, dancing at balls, and meeting his family, among a number of other social expectations. He could never meet her mother and sisters as they were in Portsmouth in a run-down cottage.

Although she deeply loved her father, she found his inability to leave more than a paltry sum for her mother’s annuity maddening. It was true she’d wouldn’t have met Nate if not for her current circumstance, but there was no doubt of her future due to the lack of money. She and her family had become charity cases. No one in their family wanted them; why would Nate once he knew of her reduced situation? Disheartened by his request, Lilith pulled her hand away. The brisk, autumn air immediately removed all trace of warmth.

“I am sorry if I led you to believe I wanted anything more than conversation.” She handed him the periodical and stood to leave.

“Wait, Miss Bradley, please do not leave. Is it wrong of me to want to know you?” His voice cracked as he spoke leaving her heart in misery.

“I cannot give you what you ask. Therefore, this friendship is bound to torture us both.”

Nate took hold of her elbow and turned her around. She looked up into his earnest face, hoping he would let her leave without further

embarrassment to them both. "I have never met a woman who loves astronomy as I do. I cannot permit you to leave me standing alone in this meadow without a hint of where to find you. Please, I will do everything most proper. I will speak to your uncle and gain his permission to court you."

Lilith pulled away, irritation building as she saw the intent of his heart and heard the sincerity in his request. "That is just it, sir, I do not want you to seek out my uncle. I had hope of a friendship, not a courtship."

"Forgive my haste in requesting more from you than you are ready to give. I do not mind a friendship."

Lilith found her heart racing. It was difficult to walk away from his pleading gray-blue eyes that happened to match the current mood of the afternoon sky. It was even more difficult to pull away from his obvious interest in astronomy. He understood the pleadings of her heart, when it came to the heavens. She'd spent years hoping for a man such as Nate, and she had imagined finding a man who could see into the depths of her soul with an earnest gaze. It was a cruel twist of fate to find such a man when she couldn't have anything more than a friendly conversation.

The heat of his intensity burned her cheeks as she considered how to respond. If she walked away, and never sought him out again, it would end the constant worry of being caught. But it would also break her heart. She might never be able to have him as more than a friend, but she could dream.

Allowing herself one bit of pleasure, Lilith justified the continued friendship. Laying out clear expectations of their time together would stop Nate from developing any further thoughts of a courtship. She allowed herself to believe she would be the only one injured when their friendship dissolved. "If you mention it no longer, then I will stay."

Nate visibly relaxed and she allowed him to assist her back to her position against the rock. She'd wondered at his passionate plea and wondered if he'd found women who'd avoided him in the past. It was difficult to believe, as he was handsome and well-spoken.

Nate cleared his throat and handed the periodical back to her. His forced smile told her it would take him time to digest her refusal of anything more than friendship, but he would be fine. Men were quick to move past women who showed little interest in a courtship. "Tell me, did you have the opportunity to read any other articles?"

She forced a smile on her face and placed all her worries to the back of her mind; even though she wanted to accept his courtship and reveal her secrets, it wasn't possible. Opening the book, she pointed to the first two articles with an effort of carrying on an interesting

conversation.

Kate opened the door to her bedchamber and slipped out of her room, tiptoeing so she wouldn't be heard. She knew Woodland Manor better than most of her siblings, as she'd spent the last years sneaking around during house parties and at night.

Her goal this night was to find her way up to the servants' quarters. The footman, Charlie, was a favorite for when she didn't have her usual choices. She errantly thought of Mr. Wells as she climbed the stone stairs. Although she'd never asked, she considered his righteous indignation at her behavior to mean he was too virtuous to take a woman to his chambers before marriage.

Excitement building, Kate pushed open the door and peeked around in an effort to keep her presence unknown. Mr. Jensen and Mrs. Bell would be the first to run to Norwood and tattle on her midnight antics. She had to get past five doors without notice.

The first door belonged to Mr. Jensen. The second, the underbutler. The third was easy; it was a closet full of towels for the fourth door which held the bath. The fifth door was the head footman, and the last door belonged to Charlie.

Holding her breath, Kate went to ease around the door but stopped as the fourth door opened. A woman exited, her dark hair wet flowing down her back. At first Kate thought it best to let her pass and then continue her own pilgrimage to the footman's chambers, but as the maid neared, Kate had to stifle a gasp.

"Miss Bradley," she whispered so as not to be heard, through the hand over her mouth.

The woman her brother seemed to be smitten with walked in front of the door Kate hid behind. Kate stayed where she was until another door opened. Peering down the hall, she took note of the closing door. Waiting until she was certain the maid would not exit her chamber, Kate stealthily made her way to Charlie's room.

"Lady Kate." Charlie jumped out of his bed and stood at attention.

"Oh, calm down, Charlie." She peered out the door to make certain no one heard the rumble from his shocked voice.

Whispering across the divide. Charlie sat back on his bed. "I

thought your fiancé would take care of your needs going forward.”

“He is not my fiancé.” Kate looked back toward the door, all excitement for this clandestine meeting was gone and her curiosity peaked over Miss Bradley. “I have a question for you.”

“Questions? You still haven’t helped me move from under footman to upper. I thought our arrangement was for both of us.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “You find more satisfaction in my visits than I do. Do not play coy with me.”

“Still, you promised me an advancement.”

“What do you want me to do with the upper? Have him killed so you can move into his position?”

“No. But you could find a reason to have him dismissed. I thought that was the plan.”

“Fine, Charlie. Do this last task for me and I will find a way to get rid of the upper footman.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? My bed isn’t on that side of the room.”

“I am not here for such depravity. Not tonight.” It was true she’d set out with that intention, but her mind was too busy with the woman she’d witnessed in the hall. She needed information. Her goal to destroy Nate was inching ever closer to fruition. At this rate, she’d succeed before Christmas.

Charlie gave her a look of displeasure. “I thought I was—”

Impatient with his complaint, Kate cut off his retort. “I just saw a Miss Bradley in the hall. Tell me everything about her.”

“Isn’t much to say.”

Kate rolled her eyes and gave an overexaggerated sigh. “Do you want the position of upper footman or are you happy with your current situation?”

“She started working here right after you left for London. Quiet, little thing. Speaks proper like. Doesn’t pay me any mind. Thinks she’s too good for me and the other servants. The only one she confides in is Mrs. Connolly.”

“You have to know more information. Do not servants speak to each other?”

“Gwen and Ella don’t like her. They think she’s a bit high-handed for being a lowly, scullery maid. She sneaks out every night. And before you ask, I don’t care where she goes. She’ll get herself in trouble soon enough if she keeps behaving like a duchess.”

“Is that all you have? Useless information?”

“Ain’t so useless. I told you everything I know.”

Kate considered his objection. She thought about joining him in the bed, until he stood and crossed the room taking hold of her wrist.

“Now when do I get my payment? I give and I give, and all you do



is take.”

Pushing the footman away, Kate rubbed at her wrist. He'd been rough with her in the past, and she'd found it enjoyable, until that night. “You will get your just reward in the morning. I must leave now.” She pointed to the door. “Tell me if the way is clear.”

Charlie scowled at her, then licked his lips. “You certain you don't want more?”

Kate considered for a moment. If he started asking questions about Miss Bradley, would he frighten her? Would she stop visiting with Nate at the clearing? All of her plans hinged on her current choice. Charlie was a despicable man. The proof was in the opportunity he gave for her to seduce him with the promise of advancement. He didn't deserve to be a footman, at least not at Woodland Manor.

“Charlie, will you grab my wrist again?”

“Why?”

“It will usher in your reward.” She batted her eyes and spoke with a feigned innocence. She smiled when he grabbed her wrist and twisted it behind her back. She knew he thought the midnight tryst would end with satisfaction. Instead, she stamped on his foot and took an elbow to his nose.

All she needed was signs of a struggle. With her injured wrist, she would secure the information on Miss Bradley. She wouldn't be so careless in the future, as it sounded like Miss Bradley wasn't well-liked below stairs.

Kate made certain to display the bruises on her wrist as she ate breakfast, which caused Diana to notice. With a few well-placed tears, Charlie was escorted from the house and a physician called in to ensure Kate's injuries were minor.

Nate hummed and smiled everywhere he went. He was happy.

Even though Miss Bradley refused to give him any information regarding her family and refused his courtship, he found joy in everything as the world seemed a much brighter place. He was spending time with a beautiful and intelligent woman who loved to talk about astronomy.

“Nate, have you met Miss Penrod?” Pushing the memory of Lilith from his mind, Nate forced a smile toward the woman his mother introduced.

His mother had taken his spectacles away before their company arrived. As a mother of many unmarried children, she was working ever so hard to find matches.

“Miss Penrod, I believe we have had the pleasure of speaking.”

“Yes. While in London. But if I remember right, do you not wear spectacles?” Miss Penrod hesitated before uncomfortably extending her hand for his acknowledgement.

“There are times I do, yes.”

“But he does not always need spectacles. I also believe there are nicer frames and, since they broke this morning, we will have to find new ones for him.”

Nate turned to his mother. “My spectacles broke? Mother, I need them for reading.”

“You are at a dinner party. There is nothing for you to read at this moment.”

Miss Penrod gave him an appraising look, then turned to her mother and his mother. “I will only agree to a match if it is clear he will not wear the spectacles or speak of science around me.”

Nate nearly choked on his dry mouth. “Mother, I need a moment in private with you.”

“We can speak later, dear.”

“Now.”

He’d never been so forceful in his life, but his mother was driving him mad. Only moments before, he’d been happily thinking about Lilith and meeting her in the clearing. Now he had to fend off an

arranged marriage. Grabbing a glass of punch from the sideboard, he opened the terrace door and allowed his mother to exit before taking a sip. His mouth instantly went back to normal, and he allowed himself to calm down before proceeding.

“Miss Penrod? What are you thinking?”

“I want my children settled.”

“Mother, if we are settled in unhappy marriages, it will not bring anyone joy.”

“But you can make your situation happy. You do not have to be miserable.”

He gave her an impatient glare, imploring her to understand. If he told his mother of Lilith, she would do all in her power to find Lilith’s uncle and start a courtship, if not an arrangement for marriage. He had to convince his mother to give him time so he could build trust with Lilith. She was the woman he wanted to spend his life with.

“I am yet twenty years of age. I have not yet taken a tour of the continent.”

“Do not speak of it. With Napoleon and his forces at work, I will not have my sons traipsing around the continent.”

“Then what about a trip to the states? I could go for the sole purpose of finding wealthy American men who do not care about scandal for my sisters to marry.”

He knew the last part would intrigue his mother, and when her lips turned up in a smile, he felt the sweet release of stress regarding Miss Penrod. Before his mother was able to walk away, he did have to get the answer to one question.

“My spectacles mother, what did you do with them?”

“I told you. They are broken. You will have to get new ones.”

“Why?”

She patted his arm. “I did it for you. I fear you will never marry if you continue to wear those things. You have such handsome features and I do not want you hiding behind spectacles any longer.”

“I think it is possible to find a woman who will love me even if I do use eyewear, mother.”

“You have yet to find her among the *ton*. But I hope you do one day.”



Since the temperature was growing colder, he carried a blanket out to the clearing. Nate left the dinner party much earlier than his mother wanted, but he found the entire situation with Miss Penrod to be uncomfortable.

When Lilith arrived, he stood and assisted her to the ground.

Partially sitting on the blanket with the rest of it over their shoulders, Nate found himself speechless. Every time he saw her, she was more beautiful than the last.

"There is something different about you." Lilith made a show of inspecting his face. "I cannot put a finger on it, perhaps it is a lack of sight."

Nate laughed. He enjoyed her easy manner. "My spectacles broke, or so I am told. I will have to order new ones, if I ever want to read a periodical again."

"Perhaps I could read to you." Lilith's eyes went wide with shock at her forward statement.

Nate took hold of her hands as her cheeks colored. Her nose was already a light pink due to the cold night air.

"You are fully aware of my hopes on our future. If you do not mind the reminder, I have asked to court you."

Lilith squirmed. "Do we have to speak of it again?"

"No. I am aware of your desire for continued anonymity. Although, we have known each other far longer than is necessary for marriage."

"I am aware."

"Almost two months now."

"Yes."

"My mother tried to marry me off to a woman I have only met one time before tonight."

Lilith gasped. "Are you going to marry her?"

Her reaction set his heart beating nearly out of his chest. She didn't have to declare her feelings for him to know the thought of being separated was too devastating to imagine for not only himself, but for her as well.

Touching her face, he whispered. "No. I convinced my mother it would be a terrible match. But if I did not have the hope of seeing you every night, I might have fallen prey to my mother's insistence on my behalf. She is working hard to marry me off."

"I know it will happen one day. But do not marry so soon. I could not survive without our nightly musings."

"Do you foresee a day where we will no longer be able to meet?" Panic made his entire body go cold. It worried him the effect she had on his senses. She could make him happy and then miserable within seconds.

She placed her hand over his and the warmth of her touch calmed him even through the gloves she wore. "Not at this time. Let us speak of happier matters."

"I admit I have nothing to speak of, other than your beauty."

Lilith smiled. "You must be blind without your spectacles."

"I can see quite clearly."

“Can I tell you one of my favorite things about your spectacles?”

“The majority of women find them a hideous affectation. What could you possibly find to like about them?”

“When you look at me, there is a glint of light from the moon that shines in your eyes. The spectacles reflect that light upon my broken soul.”

This was the first time she'd ever spoken of being broken. Nate lifted her hand and kissed the back of it as though they were in a fine ballroom. He wanted to heal every part of her heart, and the small admission of something personal brought him hope. “Broken items only need mending.”

“How do you mend a soul?”

“I have not the least bit of knowledge on this. I am willing to do everything in my power to heal what is broken.”

“Would you?”

“We only need to spend more time together. If we were courting, I could make a greater effort toward your soul.”

“I must leave.”

Nate knew he'd pushed too far. Each time they'd approach his hopes of courting her, she'd leave him sitting in the meadow.

“Please stay. We can speak of refracting light.”

He'd pulled the topic from her statement of light glinting on his spectacles. He held his breath as he waited for her to agree with the suggestion. If he could keep her there, speaking with him, perhaps she would realize he was honestly in love with her. Love was all it could be as she occupied his every waking thought.

Lilith looked into his eyes, and he knew she'd stay. She took a calming breath, then spoke. “There are mathematical formulas to determine astronomical refraction. Have you attempted to calculate one?”

Unable to speak, as he was constantly stunned by her interest in the subject, Nate wanted to lean in and kiss her beautiful lips. But he knew it would send her running back to her home. Instead, he watched as her lips moved with more questions about astronomy. It was a cruel twist of fate to have a woman so intelligent and interesting sitting so close and yet be out of his reach. She said she was broken; he needed to find a way to mend whatever it was that was stopping the start of a relationship written in the stars.

*M*r. Wells stared at her, causing an unease to fill her chest.

Over the past months since he'd arrived at Woodland Manor, he'd made attempts at speaking with her, all of which she'd averted without delay. He was smarter than she'd given him credit.

Kate didn't care for the topic of conversation that Wells and Samuel were discussing. The interest for her was in Wells's ability to have a philosophical discussion with her brother. She wondered what the man thought of when he sat silently. For her, she thought of revenge; She was constantly plotting revenge, for there was always someone she found need to dislike. Pushing the upcoming torture of Nate from her mind, she decided to see if joining the conversation with Wells and Samuel could lend excitement to the dreadful dinner party.

"Opinions of servants upon the family may not be welcome, but servants are allowed their thoughts. You cannot control what happens within the mind of those you pay to clean your house." Samuel said.

Wells responded with delight. There was absolute joy in the conversation, and Kate wondered if the man her father wanted her to marry had more on his mind than her dowry. The surprise she found over Wells being intelligent gave her pause. He was much more than the frog she considered him. If she took an honest moment and considered the man before her, she would have to admit he was intelligent and well-spoken. She'd hoped to have a husband she could be proud to stand next to at a party. Had her father chosen better for her than she could for herself? She wasn't certain where the thoughts had come from, but they were important for her to consider.

"Many within Society have the opinion that we pay these people to serve us and therefore we should rely upon their discretion when needed."

Samuel, ever a champion for the lower class and the need to give dignity to all people, poured a drink from the sideboard and handed it to Wells. "England will have to change one of these days. We must learn from previous uprisings so as not to repeat such travesties."

"What do you mean?"

Samuel tapped his fingers on the side of his glass. "The French Revolution for one. Consider the economic inequality amongst the growing lower classes. It was bound to happen."

"Yes, but servants in our Society are better behaved, and would it be a travesty to lose Mad King George?"

Samuel shook his head. "The colonists are a good example of people who were from our shores and rebelled."

Wells sipped his drink and then argued back. "Traitors against the crown. It is no wonder King George lost his mind."

"You cannot discount the people who formed the American Colonies and now run the states. They proved that an uprising against what was considered tyranny is possible and can be won."

Wells shook his head. "I do not care to disagree with you, Samuel. I think you have a good heart wanting to help the street urchins working in London. But it is wrong to take people out of their current Society and force them into another when there is such a gap in station. England certainly has not made such a drastic change and will not in our lifetime."

Samuel argued his point. "Children should be in school receiving an education. Instead, our Society lifts the wealthy with knowledge and keeps those born to lower circumstances cleaning chimneys and shining shoes. I plan to champion for these children."

Kate moved away from Samuel and Wells. It worried her to see Wells and her eldest brother speaking so passionately. She didn't want her family to like him because she hated Wells. At what point would Wells make himself a part of her family? Did they already enjoy his company? He hadn't hidden away in his chambers over the past months while she'd avoided him.

Watching Wells and her brother from the corner of the room, she noticed Diana, Adele, and Rilla had all engaged in conversation with Wells at one point during the evening. None of them had looked uncomfortable. Brushing it aside, she decided it was out of necessity. No one liked Mr. Wells. But they had to be kind as he was a guest in their home.

Kate made her way out onto the terrace to get away from the party. Her mother was determined to marry off each child this year due to her scandal, and the constant parties were wearing on Kate's nerves.

She watched as Nate strode off in the distance and thought about following him. She could jump out of the trees and divulge Miss Bradley's identity, destroying his growing admiration for the woman, and arrive back at the party without anyone knowing she was gone. Closing her eyes, she chanted a reminder. *It will be more effective if he finds out in front of our parents. His reaction will determine the*

*punishment from Norwood.* Silently she held hope that her parents would find him a despicable match similar to what they'd found for her and force him into a marriage.



Lilith sat on her bed unwilling to move. She would have to at some point, as she needed to start chores for the day. But going about mundane tasks could break the magic of the night she'd spent viewing the stars with Nate. She was in love. She didn't know anything about his parentage or how he truly felt about her, but love was the only answer for what she'd seen in his eyes and the flutter of her heart. If she were at home, in Somerset, she'd go back to bed and daydream about the man, but that life was over. She had to push all thoughts of Nate from her mind, and she needed to end their friendship. As her bedchamber door flew open, Lilith jumped up from the end of her bed.

"Are you ill?" Gwen stood in the doorway, hands on her hips.

"No. I lost track of time."

"Daydreaming again. Mrs. Bell will have your hide if you don't get to work. The fire hasn't been set nor the water brought in. Do you think someone else will do your chores for you?"

The magic of love quickly dispelled with each vicious word spat in her direction. Lilith stood and straightened the covers on her bed while Gwen continued her rant.

"We all have a part to do to keep this place running. If you have to be ordered to do your chores, you may as well not be here. We could find another scullery maid right easy. One that's prettier than you."

Lilith pushed past Gwen and started towards the stairs.

"Duty and pleasure aren't interchangeable. You'll lose your place here if you keep up with such amusements. You may think it's innocent pleasure, but when you affect all the rest of us servants, it's grounds for dismissal."

Ignoring the maid, Lilith rushed into the kitchen and set the fire. "Sorry Mrs. Connolly. I will not dawdle again."

"You better get on with it," Mrs. Connolly said pointing toward the water bucket. "Mrs. Bell is in a right ornery mood this morning."

Lilith grabbed the bucket and ran for the exit. The cold took her breath away as she ran toward the well. The frost crunched beneath her shoes as she danced, trying to keep a bit of warmth in her body.

She'd never been in such a terrible situation with Mrs. Bell. Late for chores was far worse than anything she'd done since taking the position as maid. She'd spilled water down a flight of stairs her first week at the manor, but even then, she'd only received a watchful glare upon her as she mopped the floor. Discussions of duty seemed polite now as Lilith considered the reprimand coming her way.

"If you ask me, you deserve to have your wages cut for having to be woken up." Gwen hollered out the door as Lilith filled the bucket.

"Oh, go on with you." Mrs. Connolly's impatience filtered out the door before Gwen slammed it shut.

When Lilith returned to the warmth of the house, she decided responding to Gwen might stop the girl from continuing the jabs. She couldn't imagine losing pay for a late morning.

"I was already awake. You only burst through my door. Now leave me alone so I can get to my chores."

"Little Lilith, so precious with her daydreams. Where do you go when you are staring off into the air?" Gwen laughed over her taunt. When no one else joined in, she nudged Ella in the side, which set Ella to nervous giggling.

Instead of worrying over the situation, Lilith took to the stairs to start her morning chores. Allowing her mind to wander back to the evening spent with Nate, she considered what would happen if she accepted his offer of courtship.

Marriage would come soon after, which would take her out of this difficult situation. But would he happily accept her mother and sisters into his life to care for them as well? She wished there was an available dowry to offer. He deserved a woman who could bring assets to the marriage.

Lilith carried the bucket of waste out to the disposal area away from the house when she noticed two men taking exercise. Due to her position, she'd never met any of Lord Norwood's family. Covering her nose right before removing the towel, Lilith took one last look at the men and dropped the bucket.

"Nate!"

The shock of seeing him at Woodland Manor made her momentarily forget what she'd been about until the smell of waste hit her nose. The contents of each chamber pot she'd emptied splashed upon her legs and on her dress. With the hope of not being seen, Lilith ran back to the manor. As soon as she entered the kitchen, Gwen took notice.

"It isn't enough you have to empty the slops; you now want to bathe in it?"

"Leave me alone!" Lilith yelled.

Confused over seeing Nate at the place she currently called home,

Lilith needed time to think. What would happen if he saw her as a lowly maid? She didn't have to entertain the thought long. He would end their friendship and stop all communication. Her life would be much simpler. But she didn't want that life. Even as she'd spent her morning thinking about ending the friendship with Nate, she wanted to keep meeting him every night for a discussion about the universe. If she thought losing all her friends, her father, and ultimately everyone she loved was horrible, she now knew there was much worse that could happen. Losing Nate would destroy every ounce of what she had left of herself.

"You'll have to change out of the mess you are in. I'll heat some water for you." Mrs. Connolly walked by with a bucket.

Usually, Lilith would take it from her, but she feared being seen. She would have to watch for him every time she left the kitchen to fill buckets of water or to do any chores on the outside. When Mrs. Connolly returned with the bucket, Lilith found a moment to whisper a question.

"Mrs. Connolly, is one of Lord Norwood's sons named Nate?"

"Mr. Nathaniel?"

Lilith's lower lip trembled as she gulped down her panic. "I suppose that could be his name. Does he like science?"

"Oh yes. He is very intelligent upon such matters. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

She managed to wait in the entryway for the hot water before taking it up to her chambers. After cleaning her body, she left her uniform to soak. Lilith took extra time to dress; the anxiety from finding out Nate was the son of an earl was now gone. Now she only found disappointment. She needed to confide in him and tell him she held the position of a scullery maid. It would end the enchantment they'd shared, but as she'd learned over the past year, all good things have to come to an abrupt and harrowing end.

Nate took his foil and stood ready for Samuel to advance with

his face turned up in a contented smile. The freeze from the night before left the snow packed and hard, perfect conditions for sparring. His mind filled with the beauty of Lilith and everything they'd spoke of the night before. Her knowledge of telescopes far exceeded his own.

Samuel advanced and quickly scored a point. Laughter filled the air as Nate's eldest brother boasted of his expertise.

"Pay attention now." Samuel lunged again and scored another point.

"I do not think I am in the mood for this. I admit I am distracted."

"An excuse for losing. Come now, you are better than this."

Nate shook his head trying to clear the memories for a short time to complete the exercise. Focusing on Samuel, he stood ready for the round to begin. He parried, blocked Samuel's foil, and found himself lunging toward his brother.

"What is this smile you constantly have on your face? Abby and mother are certain it has to do with a woman."

Nate moved into a feint and attacked, scoring his first point. "I have not a clue as to what you are referring. Perhaps you could demonstrate this so-called facial expression."

Samuel stood straight; his foil pointed to the ground. "I know when you are hiding information. Out with it. Who is the fortunate lady captivating your thoughts?"

Nate laughed, his happiness uncontainable. "She is wonderful. Samuel, if you could only meet her, you would find her to be my perfect match."

"Why have I not met this angel? What has stopped you from introducing her to our family?"

"She is concerned about keeping our courtship quiet. Well, I say it is a courtship, but she has not agreed to call it such. I cannot contain my excitement for knowing her. Every time we are together, I thoroughly believe I am the only one who matters. Samuel, she has the ability to make the stars shine in the night sky."

"I remember you mentioning a young lady months ago. I had not

realized your friendship had progressed. It sounds as though you have met a heavenly being. There is no one so angelic upon the Isle of Wight other than my wife."

Nate appreciated Samuel's humor. Abby was a wonderful woman and Nate enjoyed having her as a sister, but even she didn't compare to Lilith.

"Believe me, when you meet her, you will understand what I am saying."

"Nate, where did you meet this lady?"

"On a starlit evening when the moon was full."

Samuel growled. "Stop speaking in riddles. Father and mother will not be able to handle another scandal so soon. Who is this woman and her family? Why have you not brought her to the house?"

"Scandal? Why would you say such a thing?"

"Nate." Samuel's tone told him it was a warning. "Were you properly introduced to the lady?"

"No. But it no longer matters. We have spent many an evening discussing the stars and astronomy. She is knowledgeable on everything from the ancient Greeks forward. Her knowledge on refracted light astounds me. I find I am lacking on the subject and could use some time for study."

"Remind me of her name so we can call upon her family."

Nate laughed. "That is the wonder of the entire relationship. I do not know who her family is or where they live. She is staying with an uncle and aunt."

"Their names?"

Remembering her coy response when he'd asked the same question, Nate smiled knowing it would vex Samuel further. "She refers to them as aunt and uncle."

"You cannot court a woman if you have not spoken with her guardian."

Nate nodded. "Which is why the situation is so confusing. It is technically, but not officially, a courtship." Nate clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I have a bit of studying to do. Do you mind if we continue sparring another time?"

Without waiting for his brother to respond, Nate handed the foil to Samuel and rushed off to the library. He hoped to find out more about telescopes before he and Lilith met again.



Nate made his way out to the clearing hoping Lilith would meet him. It was overcast and he was certain it would snow before morning, but looking at the stars was no longer his priority. He missed the woman

who put the smile on his face and made his stomach swirl like a whirlpool. Every moment they were separated was too much. His conversation with Samuel was still fresh in his mind, Nate understood why his brother was concerned. Stepping out from the trees, his eyes fell upon Lilith and his smile brightened further.

"I thought I was early. How long have you waited?"

Lilith immediately brightened. "Not long."

Nate motioned forward. "We will not be able to see the stars tonight. Will you walk with me?"

He held his hands behind his back. Over the months of meeting and chatting he'd learned it was disastrous to offer his arm or any action of courtship. She'd leave if he offered too much.

"Lilith, will you tell me about your family?"

"Nate, it isn't wise for you to know anything."

"You can keep all identifying information silent. I only want to know more about you."

Lilith considered his request for a short time as they walked, silence growing between them. He wondered if she would leave and never return, as his question invaded her request for anonymity. When she spoke, her voice pierced the silence like a long-awaited, sunny day.

"My mother and sisters are all I have left."

"Older? Younger? Where are you in the family line?"

"I am the oldest child. I have two younger sisters."

"Are they on the Isle?"

Lilith shook her head, and he could see the longing for family and home as it rested upon her face. "I have not seen them since I arrived on the Isle. But we write often, and they tell me everything is well with them."

Nate wanted to tease her, but only a little. "When you write to them, do you mention me?"

Lilith laughed. "No. My mother would be scandalized to know I meet with a handsome young man and speak of atmospheric gas."

Her comment sent him into laughter. "I suppose it would be shocking to hear such a conversation, especially in a ballroom. Tell me, Lilith, have you ever spoken of such scientific matters at Almack's?"

Lilith shook her head. "I have never been to Almack's."

"Why?"

"My father died before my first season."

Humbled by her statement, Nate took a moment before asking his next question. They were close friends now; he should know how to bring her comfort. "How did it happen?"

"He went on a business trip to India. His investments in muslin and

other haberdashery required his attention. His ship never arrived at port. When word came to us, they said he'd been gone for at least a month."

"I am sorry. The sea is unforgiving."

Lilith stopped walking and looked him in the eyes. "Life is unforgiving. My life broke when my father died. Without him, my family is nothing and has nothing."

Nate reached for her. He wanted to lend comfort. Hearing her speak again of being broken pained his heart. With all sincerity, he gazed into her eyes hoping she would understand his need to help. "What can I do to mend the broken pieces of your life? How can I help you?"

"There is nothing any of us can do." She looked up at the cloudy sky and two drops of rain fell upon her nose. Nate knew it wouldn't be long before they had to return to their separate homes. "I have often wondered if my father knows where I am. Is he disappointed in me? Or did he know this would be my life?"

Nate couldn't answer the questions, and he was certain Lilith wasn't looking for a response. It was as if she'd forgotten he was standing next to her as another drop of rain hit her face. Afraid to spoil the silence with words, and frightful she would end their time together, Nate allowed her to ponder while looking at the overcast sky.

When she looked back at him, Lilith whispered, "I will cherish these moments with you. Even after they end."

Nate reached out and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Lilith, I do not want this to ever end. Why can we not stay here in this very moment for the rest of our lives?"

"All acquaintances and relationships have finality. The earth and stars may orbit the sun sitting perfectly in their places above us, but we are organic beings with a beginning and an end. Everything has an end." Her statement came out with a tortured finality. It left him with a sense of loss.

Nate stood in stunned silence as Lilith left him alone in the clearing. Rain fell upon his head, drenching him, before he had the strength to move from the spot. He wanted to run after her, but he knew well enough she was gone and he wouldn't find her. Determined to make their relationship last, Nate would refrain from asking about her family in the future. He'd never seen her so distraught, and it wasn't helpful to know his questions had been the source of her discontentment.

Kate needed to rid herself of Mr. Wells. Under her father's watchful eye, Mr. Wells had been a proper gentleman, but was he always in such rigid form? The ease in which she dispatched of the footman, Charlie, put a smile on her face as she formulated her next move. If she had her way, Mr. Wells would be traveling back to Liverpool the following morning.

Her plan, if she succeeded, involved the frog-faced man kissing her. She wondered what it would feel like to have his thin chops pressed upon her own perfectly plump lips. It would be a sacrifice willingly taken for the opportunity to rid herself of the man. When he was focused on wooing her, she would scream and claim he took liberties she was unwilling to give thus protecting her hand for another man's offer.

Keeping an eye on Mr. Wells, Kate sat on the sofa by Diana. She couldn't be obvious in her attack upon the man, otherwise she'd be branded a liar. Kate sipped her tea and engaged in small talk. "Diana, what plans have you for today?"

"Mother needs help with the poetry soir  e. You are welcome to help."

"No, I think not. I have other pressing matters."

"Such as? You have spent the last months sulking over your arranged marriage. Do not tell me you have anything else to do."

Kate turned to her eldest sister with a hard glare. "How would you handle such a dastardly situation?"

"If you took the time to get to know Mr. Wells, you would feel differently about him."

"Whatever do you mean? You revile him as much as I do."

"I find he improves upon acquaintance."

"Hardly!" Kate laughed.

Diana turned to face her with a deep sincerity and a bit of pity showing in her eyes. "You have spent the last months agonizing over this arrangement while the rest of the family have found Mr. Wells to be a genuine man."

"Genuine? Whatever do you mean?"



“He is above reproach. You are fortunate he is the one father has tasked to save your reputation.”

“You are speaking in riddles. I do not believe a word flowing from your wicked tongue.” Kate smiled, hoping her sister would laugh and they would spend the rest of the morning abusing Mr. Wells in private. When Diana’s face stayed straight in an earnest desire to express her opinion, Kate sunk lower in her seat. “Do you truly not care about his frog face?”

Diana looked to Mr. Wells with examination. “I admit, I no longer see the qualities of a frog. I find I am truly repentant for thinking ill of him.”

“What about the warts on the rim of his hair? What do you think of such a blemish? In my opinion it makes him dirty. I cannot imagine his home is more than a hovel.”

“He does not have warts. If you get closer to him, you will see they are freckles along his hairline.”

“Freckles?” Kate shook her head in frustration. “I was told they are warts by a very reliable source of which I refuse to divulge the name. Do not ask, for I will not tell. But I must know what happened to make you stand close enough to Mr. Wells to see his freckles?”

“Samuel told me. I have not been in any improper situations with Mr. Wells.”

“Thank the heavens for that!” Kate rolled her eyes upward. The prayer she’d said upon Mr. Wells’s arrival hadn’t yet come true. Both her father and Mr. Wells were in perfect health. Perhaps, she thought, the Lord needed a bit of assistance from her to make such prayers a reality.

“What about the slobbering kiss he left on my hand when we first met?”

“You overexaggerate. He kissed your hand with such tenderness. You should be thankful he treats you so well. Most men would have taken Papa’s money, wed you with a special license, and then thrown you into a country estate without friends or family for company. Be thankful Mr. Wells is a thoughtful man.”

“His father had to clear his throat to get him off my hand.”

“The elder Mr. Wells has a tendency to clear his throat often. I cannot believe you have been so preoccupied with other pursuits you have not taken notice of anything around you.”

“If you are so enamored by the man, you may have him for a husband.”

“I am not the one in need of saving.”

Kate wanted to continue the argument, but she decided to allow Diana to turn to their other sister for further conversation. Kate needed to observe Mr. Wells among her family. Her brothers chatted

comfortably with him. Remembering the philosophical conversation with Samuel, she knew all other communications would have been as sincere. Her brothers weren't simply pleasing a guest in their home, they enjoyed speaking with Wells. Her father engaged in banter with the man. It was strange. A sickening jolt pained her stomach as she realized he had somehow become a part of her family while she'd slowly moved to the outskirts.

Head in his hands, Nate sat silently contemplating his choices while attending the latest of his mother's social gatherings. Poetry sounded through his head as he thought of Lilith. It was curious she was never in attendance, even though his mother made certain to invite the whole of the neighborhood. Their last conversation weighed upon his mind. She'd claimed to be broken and now he understood a little more of what it meant. When he asked Lilith why she never attended, somehow, she'd found ways to avoid answering. He needed to focus and find a way to pull answers out of her instead of allowing her to distract him with astronomy.

Still curious over her response to his offer of courtship, Nate grunted in dissatisfaction. He'd thought she was different than the women he'd found in London and at these social gatherings. He'd found many women who wanted to look at the stars, which somehow turned to code for flirting and kissing. But when he was with Lilith, she kept her distance, and her version of stargazing equaled his own. It shouldn't have plagued him to find out she was only there for the stars.

"What is wrong with you?" Leigh nudged him and motioned toward the front of the room.

Their sister-in-law, Abby, stood accepting applause for her performance. He instantly sat straight and clapped with enthusiasm. When she took her seat, he slouched down to consider his plan of action.

Leigh hit his knee against Nate to get his attention. Eyes expectantly wide, he put his hands up in a motion to let Nate know the question needed to be answered.

"I am not in the humor for a poetry reading."

"One need only look at you to determine this. You do not seem yourself."

Nate considered the observation. Was he behaving differently? Unable to answer, he looked to his brother. "How so?"

"You are quiet and withdrawn. What happened to the happy Nate we have experienced this last while?"

“Still inside me. Is it necessary for a smile to be plastered permanently on my face?”

“No.” Leigh looked to choose his words before continuing. He focused back to the stage and motioned to the new performer. “Miss Harrington would make a fine match. Why do you not attempt to speak with her?”

“Why do you not consider her for yourself?”

Leigh smiled and shook his head. “Mother knows I am trying to find a match. If I put forth the effort, she leaves me to the search.”

“I see. This means you can feign interest in any number of women and escape our mother’s wrath when a match does not work.”

“Exactly. Learn from me and you can stay a bachelor. Follow our brother and you will be married before spring.”

If he were honest, he didn’t want to marry so soon. He was young. He could tour the continent for a few years and visit Italy, Germany, and other wonderful places, then leave for the states and spend a bit of time upon their shores. He’d heard exciting anecdotes of Boston and hoped one day to visit. If he were married, it would be a desire never realized.

He nodded in deeper consideration of Leigh’s words and wondered if Lilith would wait for marriage. She didn’t want to divulge the identity of her relations, and this would be a way to keep the secrecy. They could form a secret understanding and continue to meet for nighttime viewings of the stars until he left for his tour.

“If I go to the continent, would you want to travel with me?”

Leigh shook his head. “Mother would never allow it. I already took a few years for travel with Samuel. She might even find me a wife if I suggest it.”

Nate tried not to laugh. It wouldn’t be appropriate given the intensity of Miss Harrington’s performance. She was articulate and had a melodic voice for poetry. “What if I choose to travel the states?”

Leigh’s eyebrows rose in temptation. “An offer I would be hard-pressed to refuse. I would like to see New York and the untamed west.”

“Then I can count on you?”

Leigh adjusted in his seat, a sign he was seriously considering the offer, until he stopped and turned back to the front of the room with his face drained of color. Nate looked up to see their mother eyeing them with suspicion. Instead of putting his head back in his hands, Nate followed Leigh’s example and sat in silence while Miss Harrington finished her performance.

He wanted to ask more about Leigh’s reaction, and his reasons for not wanting to find a match, but their mother kept a stern glare upon them. Love was glorious when found with the right woman. Inspired

by his feelings for Lilith, he knew leaving for a tour wasn't the right course of action.

As the performances ended, Nate looked to the clock. It was nearing the time he would need to sneak out of the house. Hovering on the edges of conversation, it would be easy to slip away without notice. He looked around, made his way to the sideboard where glasses of punch sat waiting for thirsty guests, and picked one up to sip while he searched for his parents. His father stood in the middle of the room conversing in a large group. His mother eluded him upon first glance. A second scan of the room told him she was definitely absent.

Placing the now empty glass at the end of the table, he slipped past his siblings and the people busy chatting to make his way out onto the terrace. From there, he would take his leave down the stairs and rush toward the clearing.

"Where are you off to?" His mother's voice sounded to the right of him. "Do not take another step."

Stopping midstride, Nate fumbled to find an excuse for the escape. "It is a very warm evening. I had need of air."

His mother shook her head in disbelief. "You are sneaking out again. I told Norwood we needed to address this much earlier than now."

"Mother, I will explain everything once I have an answer. But I really must take my leave."

"You will explain now. If not, you will stay here."

What could he say to appease his mother? If he told her of Lilith, she would ask for more information. She would send a search party out to every home on the Isle to find the woman her son was in love with so a match could be made. He didn't want Lilith to be bombarded and her wishes for privacy ignored. Her reaction to his offer of courtship still burned shame in his chest.

"Mother, I promise if you let me leave now, I will have an explanation for you in the morning."

"No." Taking his arm, his mother pulled him back to the party. She forced him to a group of women. "Have you all received an introduction to my youngest son?"

Nate tried to keep his face composed as he thought of Lilith arriving at the dark, cold clearing. Would she meet him the following night if he missed this one? Would this be the end of their short time together?

"Mr. Richardson, what did you think of the performances this evening?"

It was terrible he couldn't remember the name of the lady speaking to him. She was pretty, after all, but he was certain when he'd asked

her for a dance at Almack's the previous year, she'd avoided him most fervently afterward.

"Each performance was most enjoyable." It was a simple statement and didn't require further comment.

"But was there not a favorite?"

He turned to see another woman who'd made great pains to ignore him in the past. It was odd he couldn't remember their names, or perhaps with his heart aching for Lilith he didn't care for the memories.

"I found each performer to be much accomplished. If you will excuse me."

He noticed his mother across the room in conversation, unable to watch his every move. Instead of lurking, Nate dashed from the house to find Lilith.

The clearing was more than a bit cold as the October nights moved toward frost and snow. It was only a matter of time until their clandestine evenings would have to end. Lilith regretted the increasing cold more than ever as she thought of nights sitting alone in her chamber looking out the small window and wondering if Nate were in the library viewing the stars through a telescope, or if his mother had found him a wife. She wondered how long it would take him to forget about her and knew she didn't have a right to want him to remember their evenings together. He needed to move on and find a wife who could give him a dowry. Men needed money and support as well as women.

"A penny for your thoughts." Nate leaned close, nudging her shoulder as they walked along the tree line.

"Oh, I was contemplating the end of our evenings together."

"Whatever do you mean?" Nate looked thoroughly alarmed. "Are you leaving the Isle?"

Lilith smiled and took his offered arm. It was a small gesture he'd done many times, but it still managed to set her heart pounding. "No. You will most likely leave this place before I do."

"I am utterly confused."

"I only meant it is turning cold and we will be unable to continue our evening strolls. It is already too damp to sit upon the ground and view the wonders above. Tomorrow the temperature will drop again, and before long we will have snow."

"All the more reason for us to forget this ridiculous agreement of keeping where you live a secret. Lilith, I want to court you and ask for your hand in marriage. I cannot do this if I have not the opportunity to speak with your guardian."

Lilith looked away. It was the same argument they'd had since meeting, yet it had grown with purpose. She wanted nothing more than to give him her mother's direction in Portsmouth, but he would then discover her deception.

Not waiting for her response, Nate continued to speak. "If we were at my home, we could sit near the fire in the library and look through

the telescope.” Pulling her to a stop, Nate lifted her chin with his finger. “We currently stand directly below the Great Pegasus Cluster.”

“Pegasus, the giant, winged horse? What does he have to do with our current predicament?”

Nate cupped her chin in his hand. “Absolutely nothing, other than it would be wonderful to see it through a magnified lens. I know you would find it fascinating.”

She knew she should pull away and continue their walk, but the cold, night air didn’t bother her when she stood so close to the man she loved. She could listen to Nate speak about clusters, galaxies, and nebulae for the rest of her life and never find it boring.

He leaned forward, looking into her eyes with the intensity of a man in love. She’d never seen such depth before but knew within her soul he was declaring his intentions without words.

Nervously, Lilith waited. Would he finally kiss her? If he did, was it right to keep her position as scullery maid quiet? He had a right to know who he was in love with, especially now that she knew he was one of Lord Norwood’s sons.

“I will not be able to meet you for the next two weeks.”

“Why?” She heard the panic in her voice but didn’t care. Two weeks seemed a lifetime when considering they’d be parted.

“I need to replace my spectacles. I have an appointment with a doctor in London and then I have to wait for the order to arrive.”

Lilith reached up and placed a hand on his cheek. “Do you truly need them? I could read to you for the rest of our lives, if only it meant you would not leave even for a day.”

Nate took hold of her hand, the warmth of his hand pulsating through her arm. As he gazed into her eyes, she knew his leaving would give her time to formulate the proper words for sharing her current situation. The time apart might help her mind clear of all the excitement and love she had for him, or it could make her heart break over the realization that they would one day be separated for much longer than a fortnight.

“It seems like a long time, but when I return, we will have more to speak of. I brought a book I found in my father’s library on planetary movements. I thought you might like to read it while I am away.”

Taking the proffered book from him, Lilith nodded in understanding. “I will miss you.”

“And I you.”

“What will you do with your evenings while you are in London?”

They started walking again, the moment of passion gone. There’d been many moments where if she wasn’t holding back, he would have kissed her. But instead, he showed her the respect she’d requested.

“I fear my mother has already seen to my schedule. I have a



younger sister who is currently there for the season. My mother expects me to spend my evenings with Lord and Lady Trenton going from one ballroom to the next.”

He’d given her family names. This was something they’d stayed away from, given the agreement of anonymity. But Lilith knew Lady Trenton. They weren’t dearest friends, but they were acquainted. Stunned by another confirmation of his position as Lord Norwood’s son, Lilith tried to keep her nerves from overrunning.

Pulling her to a stop, Nate lifted her chin. Lilith took a deep breath and wondered if this was the moment he’d kiss her. She wanted him to do so yet feared the expectations afterward.

“Do not fear my beautiful Lilith. You shine brighter than any of the women in London. I will come back to you, as I am now.”

Lilith shook her head, a smile forming on her lips. “I do not know if I will recognize you with new spectacles. I am told thin rims are all the rage.”

“Have you been speaking with my mother?”

“If I had, she would have introduced us properly.”

Nate smirked. “I think the time for a proper introduction is long past. Our courtship should come out of the shadows.”

Lilith could wait no longer. She wanted him to kiss her but knew he wouldn’t. Instead of responding with a quick-witted remark about how they weren’t courting as she hadn’t accepted his offer, she stayed silent— waiting, always waiting. Although it was unconventional, courtship was the proper term for their clandestine meetings.

Realizing he truly wouldn’t make a move without her permission, Lilith moved to the tips of her toes and brazenly touched her lips to his. It was the briefest invitation, which was all Nate needed. When he pulled her into his arms for a long and thorough kiss, Lilith beamed with happiness.

Kate stood in the shadows watching Nate kiss the scullery

maid. “And to think,” she muttered, “I nearly stayed at the house.”

If she were honest, the emotion she experienced upon seeing her brother genuinely happy was jealousy. Regret also plagued her as she watched him release Lilith so they could continue their walk around the meadow.

The memory of her first kiss came rushing back into her mind. It’d been in a hidden room at the home of someone she couldn’t remember at a party she’d been excited to attend. She’d been very innocent and had fallen into Mr. Grey’s clutches like a foolish debutante.

Instead of having a glorious night amongst friends and family, she’d left the party ruined, and no wiser for it. If only she’d found a man like her brother, a man who knew what it was to be a gentleman — considerate of a woman’s virtue and feelings. But she would never know what it was like to be respected by a man. Most men weren’t like her brothers, and those that were had faces like frogs.

Movement kept her feet from freezing, but they were still dreadfully cold. Her nose leaked, but she didn’t dare blow into a handkerchief for fear of discovery. When Lilith and Nate parted, Kate followed the woman back to Woodland Manor. She wanted to stop the scullery maid and accuse her of lying to the son of an earl. If Nate heard the argument, it would be all the better for the situation to end immediately. It was getting far too cold to follow the loving couple any longer.

Kate stepped forward to leave her hiding place but stopped with the sound of an argument.

“Where have you been?” Gwen demanded.

“Out for a walk.” Lilith’s timid voice sounded through the still cold night.

“I had to carry water for Lady Diana’s bath on my own. It would’ve been nice to have the help.”

Lilith turned her nose up at the maid. “When you deign to help me, I will do all I can to assist you.”

“I don’t have to help you. You’re the scullery maid. You are a maid

to us servants. It is best you learn your place in this house.”

Kate waited for the maids to go inside before she found her way through the grounds up to the terrace doors. Instead of joining the family in the parlor, she went up to her chamber and called for a maid to stoke her fire. Her entire body shook from the cold.

As soon as she was in her night rail and robe, and bundled in a blanket, Kate set to work on her plan. Now that she knew Nate was fully invested in the relationship, it was time to execute revenge and torture her youngest brother. Pulling a blank piece of parchment from her stationary collection, she vigorously wrote until she had the perfect letter of blackmail.

Instead of waiting until morning, Kate left her chambers in the late hours, smiling with excitement as she made her way up the servant’s stairs and into the hall where she knew Lilith’s room was located. The letter had taken her most of the night to concoct. If all went as planned, Nate would be in a world of misery when he returned from London.

As she slipped the letter under the door, she imagined Lilith reading it. The anguish this little note would bring into the maid’s life put a permanent smile on Kate’s face. Once Nate found out he’d fallen in love with a maid, everything would change. A new scandal would shake the core of her family and Mr. Wells would be out the door for a return trip to his Liverpool pond— all would be forgotten of her ill-advised behavior. Everyone at Woodland Manor would once again focus somewhere other than on the very forgettable and unloved third daughter.



When Kate arrived for the morning meal, she was surprised to find Mr. Wells was the only occupant in the room. She had no desire to eat with him. Turning to leave, she found the door to the dining room closed.

“I asked Lord Norwood if I could have a small moment of your time this morning.” Mr. Wells stood at his place without food. She looked to the sideboard to see it was empty.

“Where is my family taking their morning meal?”

“Lady Kate, please indulge my desire to speak with you for a short time and then you will be given a tray.”

Deciding it couldn’t hurt to find out what she could about the man she planned to remove from her life, Kate agreed. There might be information worth using against him.

“What do you have to say?”

“Are you looking forward to the Christmas festivities? I am told the

Isle is enchanting this time of year.”

Kate glared at the man. He planned to commit the crime of small talk while her stomach was empty of food.

“I see you do not care for the subject. What would you like to speak of?”

“I want to know why you did not rise to my defense when I had bruises on my wrist.”

Mr. Wells shook his head at her, which only increased her frustration. “I am not a fool Kate. You had a tryst with the footman and then accused him of wrongdoing. He is the one who needed a defense and even though your entire family is aware of this, they chose to ignore your indiscretions.”

“Yet you did not stand up for him either.”

“No. You are to be my wife. I have hopes you will be faithful once we are wed.”

“What happens if I am not? What will you do to me?”

Mr. Wells stood pondering upon her question. She wondered what was happening inside his head and what he thought of her. She was impertinent, brazen, rude, and arrogant; the list of her faults was endless. She wondered which attribute he would assign to her.

“I do not know how to answer such a question. I had hoped you would find it within yourself to respect our marriage vows.”

“Now you know I have no plans to be a faithful wife, will you end this charade you have concocted with my father?”

“I am afraid not. I fully admit to you my goal in this marriage is your dowry and the connections it will bring to my family.”

“You can marry another with the same connections.”

Mr. Wells laughed. “With women like yourself claiming I look like a frog. Tell me you were not shocked when I first spoke and a croak did not exit my mouth.”

Kate looked to the ground, anywhere but at the man who rightfully painted her as the wretch she was. It was true she’d not only helped spread such rumors about him, but she was the instigator. “I was not the only one responsible.”

“You find this connection a cruel injustice. I find it a twist of fate. You are the one who started rumors about me having warts and a frog face, and now you are set to marry the beast you portrayed me as.”

“Do you truly need the money and connections so badly you would marry a woman like me?”

“Unfortunately, yes. There is not a mother among the *ton* who will match their daughters with me now that you have taken it upon yourself to ruin my chances.”

“I have ruined you?”

“Words and actions have the ability to cause equal damage.”

Kate moved to take a seat; she'd spent her entire night drafting the letter to Lilith. She was exhausted. "Then this is a way for you to save me and you?"

"We are both broken. Reputations are fragile. Perhaps together we can rebuild what you have stolen."

"I did not steal anything from you." As she said the words, she knew they weren't true.

"I have one more question for you, and then I will leave you to your morning meal. What did I do to bring your wrath upon me?"

"I cannot say."

He looked entirely unsatisfied but also defeated. She didn't understand why he even cared to ask such questions. His aim was her dowry and connections. They didn't have to have an actual marriage, but with the questions he'd asked and his discontent with her responses, she wondered if he wanted more. Was it possible Wells wanted her to care for him? Was it possible he would come to care for her?

When Mr. Wells left, Kate stayed in her seat, contemplating the entirety of her situation. She'd dared not tell Mr. Wells her reasons for treating him so diabolically. For the only reason she had was quite petty. It happened many years previously when they'd been introduced during her first season in London and he hadn't asked her to dance. He'd asked one of her friends, and she'd been left to the clutches of Mr. Grey.

A chill ran through her body causing her to visibly shake while thinking about Mr. Grey. The daughter of an earl should be safe from such men, yet one meeting was all it took for Grey to ruin everything Society viewed as important within a single woman. The memory left her with unbidden tears rolling down her cheeks.

She didn't like herself. She didn't want to be the person she'd become, and a desire to change entered her soul. Within seconds of considering how to change, she realized it was easier to stay angry and bitter. It was much easier to push her family away and watch from the outskirts as they interacted. But most importantly, it was easier to keep Mr. Wells at a distance because she didn't want to love him, and she certainly didn't want him to love her.

When Lilith woke, a heavy weight sat in the pit of her stomach. She'd kissed Nate. It had been wonderful, and the entire way back to Woodland Manor had been as a dream, until she ran into Gwen and Ella.

Wanting to get the feeling of elation back, she thought of the way Nate held her in his arms as he'd declared his intent under the stars. But it had to end. She couldn't dream her day away and so she dragged her tired body out of bed, dressed for the day, and made her bed before heading toward the door.

A yawn caused her to pause mid-way and, in a very tired and unwilling moment, she groaned and stood with slumped shoulders over the life she now lived. It was difficult dragging herself out of bed each morning knowing she'd have to do it all again the next day.

As her eyes caught upon the parchment by the door, the excitement of a letter from her mother and sisters put a bit of cheer in her early morning. She would read it once the fire was set and the water was boiling.

With the talisman of hearing from her family in her pocket, Lilith set out to do her chores. Nate would leave for London, and she would have two weeks to figure out how to make a relationship with him work. She would need to tell him about her mother and sisters. But did he need to know she was the scullery maid?

Even as she entertained the thought of keeping it a secret, she knew it wouldn't be possible. A relationship would only be as strong as the honesty of those within. Over time the secret would grow between them; would he be resentful of her dishonesty? With the water sitting over the fire, Lilith pulled the letter out of her pocket and broke the seal. At a glance, she knew the tiny writing didn't belong to her mother or her sisters.

*Lilith Bradley,*

*I have unearthed a secret. One only you and I are aware of, at least where Mr. Nathaniel Richardson is concerned. I was also witness to your indecent show of affection for him, when you so brazenly kissed him in the clearing, which is a ten-minute walk from Woodland Manor.*

*You may well ask what I want for my silence. In truth, silence is my enemy. I once thought a tryst of my own was unheard and safe from prying eyes, but I soon found out the disaster one's reputation can suffer when behaving in such an ill-mannered way.*

*I propose you tell Mr. Nathaniel Richardson of your current position as scullery maid. If you do not comply with this demand, I will not only expose you for the lowly scullery maid you are, but I will humiliate you in front of the entire Richardson family and the serving staff. This humiliation will result in your dismissal from service.*

*The question you should now ask yourself is how long it should take for you to divulge your deceit. I understand he is to be out of town for a fortnight. You have until the time he returns to comply with my request. For upon the evening he returns from his next jaunt in the woods with you, I will expose you for the tawdry woman you are.*

Thankful she'd made the decision to tell Nate before receiving the awful letter, Lilith folded it and put it in her pocket. She needed to consider the contents within. It was possible Gwen or Ella had witnessed her rendezvous with Nate, but after much consideration she realized the paper was too fine to have come from a maid. This was the type of paper she'd used in her old life.

As she scrubbed the floor in the servants' dining area, she came to the decision that it had to be from someone in Lord Norwood's family. The person would have knowledge of Lilith's position, but also know where her chambers lie, which didn't make any sense. She'd never witnessed anyone in the family near her bedchamber. How would the person know which one belonged to her?

It was all very puzzling. As she reread the letter while lying in bed that night, Lilith's eyes fell upon the statement of her losing the position. She needed the money for her mother and sisters. This was the most concerning item, for she knew Nate loved her. Her confession would be a surprise, but after he realized his love wasn't dependent on her station in life, everything would be fine.



Two weeks went by far too quickly for Lilith, as she hadn't found the proper way of telling Nate of her current situation. She'd rehearsed the lines in her head while doing her daily chores but found each statement to be dry, leaving her sounding like a fortune hunter.

Since it was her half day, Lilith followed her fellow servants out the kitchen door, keeping her distance so she could turn off the path at the right time to meet Nate in the clearing. A light snow fell overnight, leaving the world before her coated in frost.

The snap of a twig stopped her progress. Unnerved by the thought

of someone following her, Lilith turned but found she was completely alone. She knew at least one person was aware of her meetings with Nate, for the letter was tucked away in her pocket. This person would expose her that evening, if Lilith didn't have the courage to tell him on her own.

Each step closer to the clearing left Lilith dreading his reaction. She hoped he would find it in his heart to listen and understand. He was a very scientific man, which told her he was logical and slow to anger.

As Lilith emerged from the tree line, she heard another snap of a twig. Surveying her surroundings to see if an animal followed, she again found no one in sight. Turning back to find her way to the meeting spot, Lilith screamed as she was lifted off the ground.

"My dearest love. You have come at last." Nate twirled her about and then placed a soft kiss upon her lips.

"You frightened me." She pulled away giving him a saucy glare. "Were you following me the entire time?"

"No. I came early so I could surprise you."

"Surprise me? With what?"

Nate placed her on the ground and stood proudly in front of her. She'd forgotten his reason for traveling to London until she noticed the spectacles.

"How do they look? My mother says I look distinguished. My sisters all had various reactions with the final decision of not allowing me to wear them to any social gatherings."

"I think they are brilliant. And you took my advice to find thinner frames."

Nate laughed and pulled her into his arms. A lump of guilt settled upon her shoulders as he kissed her. Her forward behavior the last time they were together had been the permission he needed. As he set her back on the ground, he took her hand and led her across the clearing. "I have found a solution to the ever-increasing winter weather. You were correct when you said we cannot continue meeting in the cold. I would not want you to catch your death."

Lilith laughed and ran with him as he increased speed. It was easy to forget the task at hand as he was overjoyed to see her. They came out of the clearing on the other side to find a small cottage nestled along the shoreline.

"Does someone live here?" Lilith didn't want to impose upon anyone's solitude.

"No. It belongs to—" Nate stopped speaking and turned to her. "May I say who the owner is? Or will that ruin the mystery you insist on keeping?"

Knowing her own resolve to speak with him about her situation,



Lilith gave him a compassionate smile. "I have been overly mysterious about my life. I do apologize."

"Does this mean you are ready to share with me?"

She wanted to say yes, but the boyish grin on his face left her senseless. He was terribly handsome, and seeing his features in the light of day constantly reminded her of this. Would he still love her once he knew she was a servant? The fear crippled her response, and she chose to avoid a direct answer.

"Tell me about this cottage." She would find a way to disappoint him later.

"It is my father's. He never uses it. No one will ever know we were here. My brothers and I used to play out here when we were little. Father would have the servants set a fire so when we were chilled, we could get warm."

"Did you bring a servant with you today?" She looked up to see smoke rising out of the chimney. Who would he have brought? Would this person tell Mr. Jensen and Mrs. Bell of her deception? Her throat constricted with worry as a mere second ticked by without an immediate answer.

"No. I will have you know I set the fire on my own."

Lilith laughed at his obvious pride and let go of the fear building inside. She knew all too well how unaware the upper class could be over the chores of a servant. It'd taken her weeks to set a fire properly. "Should I worry?"

Nate feigned insult by putting a hand over his chest in mock horror. As she let out a giggle he broke into a laugh.

"Yes, I believe you should worry. We will pray the smoke goes up through the draft leaving the inside of the cottage heated." Nate turned to her and smiled. "I missed you."

His words reminded her of the lump of fear she'd woken with that morning. The weight of her confession sat heavy on her shoulders as she forced a grin. Her head spun with worry. Pushing all thoughts aside, she followed him into the cottage to find he'd done a better job at laying a fire than she'd expected. The house was heated and lacked smoke.

Lilith turned to Nate and looked him in the eyes. "I missed you as well. Promise we will never be parted again."

It wasn't right of her to ask, knowing the information she kept silent, but in this moment, she needed to know he wanted to be with her.

"I have something more for you. It is a token of my love."

Taking the small package from him, Lilith beamed with happiness. It was easy to forget about her worries when he was near. As she pulled at the strings, a gold bracelet fell from the package. "How

beautiful.”

“It is a family heirloom. I wanted you to have it.”

“Oh no, Nate, I cannot keep this.”

“Yes, you can.”

She allowed him to lock the bracelet on her wrist. It was a beautiful piece of jewelry. A gold band with a rose and an amethyst in the middle.

“I will treasure this always.”

“I hoped you would. But, if I confess something to you, do you promise not to be angry with me?”

“I promise. But I also have a confession. So, I pray you will afford me the same?”

“Yes. Do you want to speak first, or should I?”

Lilith considered for a moment and decided to allow him to speak. She needed him to focus on her words when the time came. Pulling her to the sofa, she and Nate sat side by side looking into each other’s eyes. She loved everything about the gray-blue eyes before her. Being near him again made her realize the longing she’d had for Nate over the past two weeks hadn’t been silly. The moment of their reunion was more meaningful to her than anything she’d ever experienced. She loved Nate and her life had been empty without him.

“I pray you do not think me deceitful.”

“I never could.” The word *deceive* struck a chord in her heart. She looked into his eyes hoping he could see the love she had for him. “I know you are honest and true.”

Nate nervously adjusted his spectacles. “While in London I purchased a special license. Lilith, I realized while I was away that you are the reason for my happiness. I want you to be my wife.”

Taken by surprise, Lilith closed her eyes as she didn’t want to see the pain from her answer. Instead of telling him no, she reopened her eyes and took a deep calming breath. “Nate, I would accept your offer without hesitation if not for the confession I have to make. I am not at liberty to accept an offer of marriage at this time.”

“Why?”

Nate’s question caught her off guard. She’d wanted to give him the reason without interruption.

“Are you already promised to another? Are you married?” Nate stood and paced before her, running his hand through his hair. “I am such a fool. You refused to tell me anything about yourself for months. All you wanted was to be friends. You never attend any social gatherings.”

She couldn’t allow him to think she was so treacherous. The words bubbled up inside until they burst from her mouth. “I am a servant at Woodland Manor.”

Nate stopped his rant and turned to her. "No, you are not. I live at the manor. I know all of the servants."

"I dare not argue with you on this matter. But I am the scullery maid."

"If you do not wish to marry me you only need to say as much. Pretending to be a servant is unconscionable."

"I assure you this is the truth."

Nate sat next to her on the couch and pulled her into his arms. "I know there is something you fear to tell me. I have seen it in your eyes as I have tried to speak of a future. If it is your uncle, I will speak with him. But we do not need to argue over such trivial matters."

Lilith shook in his embrace. The anxiety of helping him understand her situation while he bore his heart and laid his protection open for her to take was enough to break through the wall she'd built around her emotions.

"You are positively shaking. I will not continue this conversation until you have had time to calm down."

"But I need you to know there was never an intent to hurt you. I wish we could be together. I wish my circumstances were different." For the first time since she'd locked her emotions away after the death of her father, tears fell from her eyes. She'd turned into a blubbering fool.

Nate pulled her close and covered her legs with a blanket. "I understand. I know you are trying to cover your emotions. I want what is best for both of us. Lest you forget, I have purchased a special license. We can be married by morning and all of your fears will be put out of your mind."

"You do not understand. There are parts of my past I have kept from you." With the continuation of her confession, a sob of emotion burst out of her chest. She was unable to speak for fear of his reaction. As her body shook with emotion, Nate took it to mean she was cold. He pulled her closer and wrapped the blanket tight around her shoulders.

In a calm and reassuring tone, Nate rubbed her arm with compassion. "There is no need to speak about it at this time. It is obvious I have touched upon a very sensitive topic. Let us focus on something else, and when you are ready you may tell me."

Lilith nodded. It was easier to agree as she truly didn't want to speak about her treachery.

"A new periodical arrived today. There is an interesting article here about the movement of stars. Do you mind if I share my thoughts with you on it?"

Lilith nodded her head, unable to meet his eyes. He deserved better than she was giving him. He deserved a woman free of debt and

the fear of starvation. He was too kind to her.

Nate laid the periodical across their legs so she could see the words. He pointed to one of the illustrations. "It is believed Sirius, Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, and Arcturus have shifted their quarters in the sky. This was originally researched over a hundred years ago, but it is fascinating to understand the mathematical implications of space moving—"

Nate continued to speak as Lilith allowed her mind to push her fears back and consider the qualities of the man sitting beside her. Nate was not only intelligent, but he was kind and understanding.

"Am I boring you?" Nate asked, leaning down to kiss her forehead.

"Not in the least. I am constantly amazed at your depth of knowledge."

"I asked my father if he would make a donation to the study of science focused on astronomy. There is much happening with Mr. Herschel and Miss Herschel researching the heavens. Did you know Miss Herschel recently visited King George's court?"

"I had not heard. Has she discovered anything of importance lately?"

"I believe there was a comet a few years ago, but nothing since then. It is amazing to know a woman serves as an astronomer." Nate held the periodical up. She is mentioned many times throughout this publication."

Excitement spread through her, making her body shiver as he gazed upon her. She knew it would be appropriate to turn away but instead she chose to reach up and remove his spectacles.

"I recently found a book in our library on constellations. I think it would be fun to spot as many as possible on a cloudless night."

"I should like that." Her answer came out a little breathier than she'd expected.

She didn't stop him as he leaned in for a kiss. With his calming presence, all of her worries disappeared. She knew he would need to understand the depth of her confession, or else the writer of the letter would expose her secrets. But was Nate's refusal of her confession his way of telling her it didn't matter? It was easy to convince herself of this path from the intensity of his love. She could believe he thought her to be the love of his life, or at least she entertained the thought as his lips caressed hers.

Lilith's heart pounded in her ears as they mutually moved together into a comfortable embrace. She lay her head on his shoulder as he continued to speak of the articles found in the latest periodical. She didn't deserve his tender words, but she wanted the moment to last forever. Pushing her worries away, she decided breaking his heart could wait.

Nate walked into the parlor with the thrill of love on his mind.

Whistling, he sat in a chair close to the window and wondered if Lilith were already at her home. Her reaction to his decision to purchase a marriage license didn't surprise him. When she tried to convince him that she was a servant, he found it difficult not to laugh. But she'd been frightened as he'd moved too quickly. He wouldn't bring up the license again, at least not until after the new year.

"You look happy this evening. Are the new spectacles better for viewing the stars?" Diana's question put a large smile on his face.

"Nothing of the sort."

"Then tell us, what has you whistling and prancing about," Diana asked.

"I was not prancing." Nate tried to make it look as though he'd taken offense, but in his happiness, it was rather difficult.

His mother laughed as he tried to glare but ended up smiling like a fool. "If I did not know better, I would say you are in love."

"Mother, you know well enough Nate has no intention of marrying any time soon. He hopes to travel to the states." Leigh's reminder of his errant plans for travel put a broader smile on his face.

"I agree with mother; Nate is in love." Kate's assessment made him raise his eyebrows. "And I happen to know who she is."

With this comment, Nate's smile lessened.

"Who?"

There wasn't one person in the room that hadn't asked the question. Everyone looked between Nate and Kate. But he wasn't shocked or surprised. There was no possible way she could know anything about Lilith.

"Her name is Lilith Bradley."

Nate's smile dissolved into a frown. "How do you know about her?"

"I happened upon you and Lilith during a nightly outing of my own. And, I was so enthralled with your trysts, I had to watch."

"Who is Lilith?" Norwood put his newspaper to the side, which meant he would join the conversation until satisfied with the answers.

Nate took a deep breath before sharing his secret with the family. He needed them to understand the tenuous situation. As he spoke of their mutual interest in astronomy, his mother's face turned up in a smile.

"I admit I am a fool in love. So, if I can convince her to marry me, I have a special license ready for when she accepts."

"Why does she not accept now? Is she not able to do so?" Diana looked confused. Her expression conveyed every emotion he'd had toward the baffling situation.

"I do not know. I think she is frightened of this uncle she is staying with. She doesn't mention him often, but I have a feeling he is unkind."

"I know why she refused your offer." Kate's smugness sent a chill of anger through him. This was not the time for her to take all of the attention. "She does not live with an uncle. She is the scullery maid here at Woodland Manor."

"The scullery maid?" Norwood said, standing and throwing his newspaper to the chair. "Nate, what is the meaning of this? Are you trying to send your mother to an early grave?"

Nate saw the truth of Kate's statement in her gleeful eyes. He thought of everything Lilith had said to him, and all the worries he'd pushed aside thinking they were a way to refuse his offer of marriage. She'd tried to tell him, but he'd refused to listen.

"Nate, speak to us. Tell us what you are thinking." He ignored his mother's plea.

He needed to know if Kate was right. Her words had successfully shattered any hopes he had in marrying the love of his life. For even though Lilith was the woman he'd always dreamed of finding, his position as the son of an earl wouldn't allow him to marry a servant. His family would be thrown into further scandal.

"I need to think." He needed to find Lilith. As he walked to the door, Kate's next words put a stop to his plans.

"She sends all of her earnings to her mother and sisters. If you go down to the kitchen to find her, you will be the reason she is turned out. Do you want such a pitiful situation on your conscience?"

"Where do you get your information?" Nate turned to look at Kate. She knew far too much for it to be an innocent coincidence.

"When I realized you were falling for a maid, I did my research. The poor girl hasn't heard from her mother in over a month because of me." Kate pulled a pile of letters out of her pocket. "I should think you can return these to her next time you meet. Perhaps tomorrow night?"

Nate watched as his mother forcibly took the letters from Kate. "You had no right to take letters from one of our servants."

“I only wanted to protect our family. I sent Lilith a letter and told her if she didn’t confess her position to Nate, I would do it for her.”

Nate looked to his father. “Please do not turn her out. I promise I will leave her alone. I will not meet with her again. I only beg you do not send her away. She tried to tell me, but I would not listen. I thought it was an excuse to avoid my offer of marriage.”

Nate wasn’t certain when his rambling stopped, but when he finally ran out of words, he knew happiness would never come again. He’d never look at another star or even the moon without thinking about Lilith Bradley.

“If you promise to end the unconventional courting of this young woman, I will forget it happened and she will keep her position. After all, the scullery maid is kept below stairs. There is no reason for you to worry about seeing her.” Norwood grunted then retook his seat.

“I will speak with her tomorrow.” Nate hoped his voice wasn’t as strangled to everyone else as it sounded in his head.

“No. I think it is best I have Jensen relay a message to the maid.” Norwood took his newspaper back in hand letting him know the conversation was over.

Scrubbing the floor in the servant's hall was tiresome. Lilith wondered if the men had any sense at all as she scrubbed another footprint made of horse manure. "How hard would it be to wipe the soles of their shoes before entering the house?"

As she was the only one in the hall, there was no need for the words to be silent. She scrubbed and bemoaned her status as the lowliest servant until her hands bled. Her skin cracked from the cold weather, daily chores, and lack of proper lotions and medications. What would Nate think if he saw her in this state?

He wouldn't care. She would have to stop thinking of him. Thoughts of Nate had become simultaneous with breathing. Jensen's relayed message from Lord Norwood regarding the end of her relationship with his son had come as a shock. But she understood. Unable to hold the tears in anymore, Lilith let them flow from her eyes.

Built up anguish for the deception she'd taken into their friendship brought a deep, guttural cry and instead of scrubbing the floor, Lilith put her head in her lap and let the pain flow. This was too much for one person to bear. Love shouldn't hurt so much.

She cried until tears no longer came and the shaking of her body stopped, only to discover at some point in her emotional collapse, Mrs. Connolly had joined her. She lay silent as the woman she considered her second mother, and the only person in the house that cared about her well-being, hummed an unknown tune and rubbed her back. Lilith didn't want to move and break the solace of the moment. There was comfort in the melody and touch of another human being.

"Nothing can be as bad as all this. Sit up and tell me what has made you sing the black psalm."

Her back hurt as she pulled her head off her lap. She didn't know how long she'd cried, but if the pain were an indication, it'd been a while. Laying her head against Mrs. Connolly's shoulder, Lilith closed her eyes imagining it was her own mother. Of course, her mother wouldn't smell of roasted duck, lemon meringue pie, and dish soap.



With a bit of encouragement, she spoke of meeting Nate upon a starlit night and every lovely moment from that point on within their friendship.

Upon finishing, Lilith sat up and dried her eyes with the hem of her apron. "I made a fool of myself. I never should have lied to him."

"A bit of flimflam will always come back to bite your gooseberry grinder. But I wonder, why did you do it?"

Shaking her head at the stupidity of her actions, Lilith didn't have a satisfactory answer. "I wanted to pretend, if only for a short time, that my father was alive and that we still lived in Somerset. Did I ever tell you about my Papa?"

"No, I'm here to listen if you would like to speak of him."

"He was the best father a girl could have. He would have loved Nate." It was all she could say before tears spilt again. The loss of her father and now the loss of her only love would be a trauma of which she'd never recover.

"Why, after your friendship blossomed, could you not tell him?"

Lilith looked down at her shaking hands. The blood had dried, and the cracks itched and ached as they attempted to heal. "I tried. But I couldn't seem to form the words without emotions getting in the way, and he did not believe me when I finally told him. He became nervous when I started shaking like a fool and told me whatever it was could wait. With such a kind man, how could I destroy the perfect world he'd created for us?"

"Well, I can't promise he'll forgive you, but if you spend all of your time showing a Friday-face you'll never pull out of this depressing state." It was sound advice and Mrs. Connolly said it with such kindness it was hard to not smile at her words.

"What do I do now?"

"You get to bed. I'll finish the floor."

"No. I could not possibly let you do my chores." If anyone, especially Mrs. Bell found out Lilith hadn't done the scrubbing on her own, she'd be turned out without pay or a reference.

"You've spent the evening in tears, and by morning will have a headache the size of Ireland. I will not allow you to finish it up tonight."

"Please, Mrs. Connolly. I am already in the cross hairs with Mrs. Bell and Mr. Jensen. I cannot lose my position." Lilith moved back to the bucket and pulled her rag out. The moment her hand hit the cold soapy water, the itching increased, and the sores reopened. She fought through the pain and scrubbed until every inch of the floor was exactly as it should be: clean.

When she finally stood and took hold of the bucket, Lilith planned to haul water for a bath and soak. Sweat pouring from her forehead

and hair falling out of the tight bun she'd tied it back in that morning, Lilith turned toward the door to find Mr. Jensen and Mrs. Bell watching her.

Startled, she put her hand on her chest. "Oh, you gave me a fright. If you will excuse me."

Walking in their direction, she found it odd neither one moved out of her path. She needed to empty the bucket, clean her sore hands and wrap them before hauling water for a bath.

"Lilith, I need you to come with me." Mr. Jensen's expression was one of disappointment.

Turning back to the room she'd spent hours scrubbing, Lilith couldn't imagine what the issue could be. Was she in for another evening of disappointment from the butler and housekeeper?

"I cannot see anything wrong with the work I have done." She wasn't about to let them speak down to her again.

"It has nothing to do with your chores. Leave the bucket here and follow me." Jensen turned away and led her down the hall. A visit with Jensen and Bell was enough to put her nerves on end. Lilith stood shaking before the butler and housekeeper.

"The deception you've brought upon Earl Norwood's family is inexcusable. I am afraid we cannot keep a liar employed at the manor." Lilith didn't argue. It seemed appropriate to turn her out, although the decision was devastating. Her mother and sisters would suffer due to her actions. She allowed Mrs. Bell and Mr. Jensen to guide her from the office. Lilith packed her bag with the few items she had, unable to process thoughts beyond her current predicament. What would she do for food? How would she find another position? Such worries clouded her mind as she looked upon the tiny room, which was once her space.

"I am afraid I cannot offer you anything. In these situations, maids are turned out without references or pay."

Mr. Jensen's soft tone made her think of a kindly gentleman, but that wasn't the case. A kind man wouldn't turn her out for such a petty indiscretion. Lilith was numb. She almost thanked them, but stopped herself before the words escaped. She allowed them to walk her to the back door without ceremony, bag in hand. As she stepped out into the winter wind, it hit her face heaping the nightmare of her current situation upon her shoulders. As the servants' door swung closed behind her and the lock clicked, she realized she had to find a place to stay, at least for the night. In the morning, she would make her way toward Portsmouth and her mother.

Lilith walked toward the small town with tears streaming down her cheeks. Now that she'd started crying, there was little she could do to stop the emotions. It was late and she knew there wouldn't be any

place open for a charity case. She had very few choices, none of which offered a warm bed for the night.

Her first foray into the world of a servant had ended worse than she ever could have imagined. When she'd applied for the position, the goal was to complete each task without trouble. There'd been a great deal of learning on her part, but she'd proudly managed to do the work, even with broken and blistered skin.

She numbly walked against the wind, wondering if it were possible to die of a broken heart. Nate had fooled her into thinking she was the reason stars shone brightly in the sky. Looking back on each moment they'd spent together, she wondered if he was laughing at her expense.

If her father were still alive, this would never have happened. Life was cruel, especially when it came to entailments. Her Uncle Bradley could have made room for her family at their home. The land was vast, the house grand, and there were rooms enough for a man who cared nothing for his relations. On opposite sides of the large home, they never would have seen each other. Even if the home in Somerset hadn't been enough for both families, there were two other estates she knew of. There was no reason for her mother to live in a cottage.

The bitterness swelled inside as she walked toward town. Her life was nothing more than a terrible joke. "It is no wonder *Mr. Nathaniel Richardson* found me easy prey."

Upon her arrival in town, Lilith's tears increased and snow lightly sprinkled from the heavens. This was one more bit of evidence to prove her life meant nothing. She would find no comfort this night. Instead, she would huddle in an alleyway and hope morning didn't come. If it did, she would find the nearest chandlery and see about selling the bracelet Nate had bestowed upon her. It should bring enough for her to travel to the mainland and hopefully on to Portsmouth.

Lilith found a very uncomfortable spot outside the local bakery where the stove must have been placed on the other side of the wall as her back warmed through the bricks. With part of her body heated, she sat in a constant state of panic. She'd never slept out of doors, but then she'd also never been in a greater predicament.



Morning came after a very long and fearful night. Nothing happened to cause her fear. Nonetheless, with her bag clutched against her chest and her aching head, Lilith exited the alleyway and crossed to the Chandler's Shop.

The tinkling of a bell sent a shiver of fear through her heart. Hands

shaking, she released the clasp on the gold bracelet and set it upon the counter. The man on the opposite side gave her a sympathetic smile.

"I need fare for the stage."

The man picked up the trinket and looked through his loupe to assess the quality. Lilith held her breath, hoping he was honest. Her only other item of worth was the compass her father left and parting with it would be worse than the bracelet. Her father loved her. Nate's recent actions told her that his words had been insincere.

"Where did you get this?" The Chandler lifted his head with the loupe still attached to his eye.

"It was a gift."

"You stole it, more than likely. I cannot give you anything for this. If you come back into my shop, I will have you arrested."

Lilith held her hand out for the trinket. "I did not steal it, sir. I will take it elsewhere."

The Chandler pulled away; the bracelet firmly clutched in his hand. "I will give this back to Lord Norwood. He will want his family heirloom returned."

"But it was given to me by Mr. Nathaniel Richardson. Please, I need only enough to travel to Portsmouth."

"Get on with you. I don't need a thieving woman in my shop. I have a mind to set the constable after you."

Afraid he'd take her father's compass as well, Lilith fled from the shop, clutching her bag. When she'd woken that morning, she'd thought she was in the worst situation possible. Now, she knew that was an understatement. Worried the Chandler would give the other shopkeepers her likeness, Lilith didn't trust anyone to exchange the compass for money.

It would be a long, cold day, but she knew the only way she'd get home was to walk. Hungry and tired, she set out down the lane hoping it wouldn't take long to find the next town.

Feet frozen and near ready to collapse, Lilith walked into the next chandlery she saw and pulled the beloved compass out of her bag. With tears streaming down her face, she kissed the last reminder of her father and their astronomical adventures together. She would have the memories even without the object.

As the loupe came out of the Chandler's pocket, Lilith said a little prayer. This was her last chance. If this man was dishonest, like the last, she'd have no way to return home. As the man reached into his pocket, she was shocked to find three guineas laying on the counter.

"Finest gold compass I've ever laid my eyes on."

Lilith looked up to see the man's kind eyes upon her. "Thank you, sir. My father always said as much."

"If it belonged to your father, do you not want to keep it?"

“I wish I had the luxury, sir.”

“It will be here for the next month.”

She thought about telling him the month leeway was unnecessary, but knowing she had a month to find a way to repurchase the compass left her with a sliver of hope. “Thank you.”

Looking at the coins, she knew handing a guinea to the stagecoach ticket master would be dangerous. “Can you give me one of these in smaller denominations?”

With the coins tucked away in her bag, Lilith found the cold didn’t bother her as it had on the walk. Less than a half hour later, she had a cloth filled with bread and cheese as she waited for the coach.

Nate sat in the parlor with his family, only because his father had requested his presence, and it was far too cold and miserable to escape out of doors. Snow blanketed the countryside leaving him the choice between solitude in his bedchamber or torture with his family. No one spoke of his misadventures with the maid. He wanted to be alone to ponder over the situation with Lilith. It was impossible to resolve without speaking to her, but the earl expressly forbade him to search for the woman he loved in the servants' quarters. Norwood's final statement on the situation came only an hour before. He would be disinherited if he married a servant.

A part of him didn't care about the disinheritance. He was the third son of an earl. In matters of Society, no one cared. Women had preferred his eldest brother, up until Samuel married the previous spring. Both Nate and Leigh had a set amount settled upon them, and when the time came, they would care for properties owned by the title as all were entailed to the heir. The only option a younger son of the aristocracy had was to marry wealth.

He loved Lilith. He didn't care if she hadn't a dowry, but he also respected his father and loved his family. There had to be a way to correct the situation without bringing further shame upon Norwood and the Richardson name. He thought of men he could match his sisters with before he married Lilith, securing their futures.

"Smoldering again?" Samuel's observation pulled a noncommittal grunt from Nate.

"Perhaps if you spoke about the issue, we could help." Abby leaned forward and touched his leg.

Samuel's wife was a kind woman, and Nate loved his sister-in-law, but he doubted she'd have the ability to soften Norwood's heart on the situation. Society wouldn't accept Lilith and his family would be shamed by his decision in love.

This was the crux of his problem. Lilith understood his desire to read scientific journals and periodicals. She supported his goal of joining the Royal Astronomical Society and she hadn't turned away from him when he had mentioned working in such a capacity.

*Is it any wonder she did not care about me taking a profession? She is a scullery maid.* His bitter thoughts made his heart ache further. She didn't deserve his censure of her position.

"My lord," Jensen said, saving Nate from having to respond to Abby. "Duke Somerset is in the hall."

Nate's eyes went wide as he, along with the rest of his family, looked to Norwood. This was a connection of which Nate was unaware.

"Dearest, do you know Duke Somerset?" Lady Norwood asked.

"No. I have never met the man. I thought Somerset recently passed away. Is it the new duke?" Norwood asked, looking to Jensen for confirmation.

"I am unaware, my lord."

"Show him in." Norwood put his hands up in a calming gesture. "If it is a private matter, I will take him to my den."

Nate moved forward in his seat, ready for the moment he would need to stand. Only moments before he was certain there was nothing that could take his mind off his current predicament with Lilith. Now, he was curious.

"Duke Somerset." Jensen's announcement sounded through the silent room.

The man wasn't familiar to Nate. As niceties were followed, Nate retook his seat ready to find out why a duke had chosen to descend upon Woodland Manor during the middle of winter on such a miserable day.

"Norwood, thank you for welcoming me into your home. You certainly did not have to do so." Duke Somerset's booming voice echoed through the room. It was a stark contrast to everyone he'd ever known.

"I admit you have piqued my curiosity. Your estate is quite distant from here. What brings you to our snow-covered Isle this time of year?"

"I understand you have a servant here by the name Lilith Bradley. I have come to collect her." Somerset spoke with such command that Nate was certain his father would hand Lilith to him without question.

When Norwood hesitated, Nate's heart started the uncomfortable pounding he'd become accustomed to when he thought of Lilith.

"Somerset, I have no legal reason to keep the servant from you. But as she is currently in my employ, I think it is best we discuss the situation in private."

A smile crossed Somerset's face, and Nate found his racing heart turning to panic. If Somerset took Lilith with him, he would never see her again. Would she work in his home? If so, which one? The Duke of Somerset would have many estates under his title. Nate leaned

forward to argue Somerset's claim on Lilith but found Samuel had moved to stand behind him and had placed his hand on Nate's shoulder to stop him from getting involved.

"I understand your concern. But I do need to ask for your family to show some discretion in this situation. If you could send for Lilith, you will have a great many questions answered."

Norwood looked to Jensen. "Please ask Lilith to come in here." Turning to Nate, his father looked him in the eyes. "You may leave this room. But not the house."

"I would prefer to stay." Nate wanted to see Lilith, even if it was a brief moment. He planned to bask in the last moments he had with her.

Jensen cleared his throat. "My lord, Lilith is no longer in your employ."

"She is no longer here? Where is she?" Duke Somerset's demand was halted by Nate's outburst.

"You turned her out? Sent her away? You promised not to do so!" Nate yelled above the duke and threw his brother's hand off his shoulder.

"Both of you calm down. I am as surprised as you." Norwood first gave both Somerset and Nate a warning glare, then turned to the butler his eyebrows raised in question. "Please, Jensen, tell us what brought about this situation."

Jensen cleared his throat. "The girl brought further scandal upon this household by deceiving Mr. Nathaniel. Mrs. Bell and I discussed the situation and felt it necessary to release her from employment."

"When did this happen?" Duke Somerset asked, his hands clenched in displeasure.

"Last night, your grace."

"Do you know where she went?" Somerset asked.

"I am unaware. I am sorry to say the girl didn't have many possessions or connections. Due to the situation with Mr. Nathaniel, I did not feel she deserved her final pay, and I turned her out without a reference."

Nate adjusted his spectacles. Norwood wouldn't like what he had to say, but he was going to look for Lilith. "Jensen, I need a horse."

Norwood turned to him. "You are on house arrest. Do not think I will let you out of my sight."

"Then you may accompany me. But I will not leave her to find a way off the Isle without money or food."

"My lord?" Mrs. Bell entered the room, cutting off further argument.

"What is it?" Norwood asked, his face turning pink with irritation.

"The local chandler dropped this bracelet off. He said a young girl



tried to exchange it for money. He was certain it was stolen and didn't give her anything for her troubles. He sent her on her way only this morning."

Nate recognized the bracelet as the housekeeper held it up for inspection. Crossing the room, he took it from the woman and put it in his pocket.

"I gave the bracelet to Lilith. She cannot be far."

Duke Somerset nodded. "Thank you. I will find her."

Norwood cleared his throat. "Somerset. I need to know what your intentions are for the girl. Although my butler and housekeeper wrongfully released her from service, I do feel that I am responsible for the chit."

Somerset cleared his throat and puffed out his chest. "All will be explained once I find her." Turning to Nate, Somerset asked, "Did you give Lilith any other items of value? Anything she can exchange for funds?"

Nate shook his head. "She has a compass. It belonged to her father."

"Are there any other chandleries nearby? Anywhere she could exchange it for money?"

"I will show you." Nate ignored his father and left for the hall. The compass meant more to Lilith than the stars, which was understandable. It was the last reminder of her father, and Nate loved Lilith far too much to allow her to exchange the compass. He would give her all the money she needed, if she would let him.

Riding through the snow was torture because of his concern over Lilith. Nate imagined Lilith frightened, cold, and alone. Remembering her shaking at the cottage when she'd tried to confess her situation, Nate increased the pace of his horse. His brothers and father rode beside him, all of them in front of Duke Somerset in his carriage.

"You have made a right mess of things," Norwood growled. "What is her connection to Somerset?"

Nate glared at his father. He usually found respect for the man to be simple, but since the edict banning his love for a servant, Nate didn't care for conversation with the earl. "I am unaware. I suggest we find Lilith and discover what the duke wants with her. I will not let her leave if I worry for her safety."

"She is under my protection, as she worked in my home. I cannot refuse a duke as powerful as Somerset."

Leigh pulled his horse closer so he could join the conversation. "How do we know he is a duke? None of us can confirm anything about him."

"I agree," Samuel said.

Brushing snowflakes off his nose, Nate nodded his head. "I also

agree. He may look like a duke with his fancy clothing, talk like a duke with his powerful, rich, baritone voice, walk like a duke with his perfect posture, and make demands of people with his cultured behavior. But that does not necessarily mean he is a duke.”

Norwood cleared his throat and tilted his head toward the carriage. “Do not speak so loudly. We will do all we can to protect the girl if needed.”

“The only protection we can give her is a marriage.” Nate looked straight into his father’s eyes as he said the words. “I am ready to declare my intent. I will not allow her to leave this Isle for anything less than a family member. And if she were related to a duke, she would not be working as a maid.”

“I will not have you marry a scullery maid. It is out of the question.”

“Father, we can discuss the particulars of Nate’s suggestion once we are back home sitting in front of the fire. For now, let us find the girl without delay.” Samuel’s level-headed response did nothing to resolve Nate’s concerns.

It was a cold, December day and Lilith had left Woodland Manor the night before. He dared not think about the state she would be in, having not had food or a proper place to rest. It seemed an age before they arrived at the chandler’s shop. Nate dismounted and threw his reins to Samuel who grunted in acceptance.

Charging into the shop, Nate didn’t wait to close the door. Snow and cold air rushed in with him. “Sir, I am looking for a young woman. Dark brown hair, soft green eyes, and she bites on her lower lip when nervous. If she came in, she might have exchanged a gold compass.”

“Came by a few hours ago. Said she needed the money for stage fare. Don’t tell me she stole the compass? Can’t trust anyone now days. Even a pretty face can mean dishonesty.”

“No. Nothing like that. Did you give her the funds?”

“Yes. Told her I’d save the compass for her if she wanted it back. I’d hold it for a month.”

“Do you know where she went?” Nate placed his hands on the counter, the edge supporting his weight. The relief of possibly finding Lilith without further delay was palatable.

“I suppose the stage depot would be the best place to search. Poor thing looked a bit done in. She might have stopped for food.”

Nate turned to see his father, brothers, and the supposed duke standing by the door. He’d noticed the coat of arms on the duke’s carriage, but he still wasn’t convinced. Anyone could have stolen Duke Somerset’s carriage. He turned back to the man behind the counter. “Do not sell the compass. I will return to purchase it once I find

Lilith.”

“I told her it would be here. I’m a man of my words.”

Duke Somerset walked forward his purse in hand. “There’s no need for us to return once we find Lilith. Give me the compass.”

The purchase took more time than Nate wanted to wait, so he squeezed past his father and brothers. He needed to find Lilith before she boarded the stage. Leaving his horse behind, Nate cut to the next street through an alleyway. The depot was only a short distance. When he recognized Lilith sitting on the bench hugging her bag containing the only earthly possessions she had left, Nate increased his speed.

“Lilith,” he said, out of breath yet invigorated by her presence.

“What are you doing here?”

He’d expected her to be cold and weary, but he didn’t anticipate irritated. Nate clutched at a stitch in his side and held a finger up to indicate he needed a moment. He noticed the damp bonnet on her head and the shivering of her body and immediately removed the coat from his back, knelt before her on the snowy ground, and wrapped it around her.

“I did not know they would turn you out. Please forgive me for not ensuring you were safe. I thought if I could speak to my father first, everything would work out in our favor.”

“Nate, we are different. You are the son of an earl. I am a mere scullery maid. Or I was. Now, I am without a position and without a way of saving my mother and sisters from certain death. Please, do not try to tell me your struggles are greater than mine.”

He’d never seen her so depleted in spirit. The Lilith he’d fallen in love with was a happy creature. He was the cause of her distress.

“I do not care what the differences are in our stations. I will give up everything for you.”

Lilith pulled away and pushed his coat back at him. “Please, leave me in peace. Lord Norwood made it clear in his message that he expects you to find a woman with a dowry. I do not have one anymore.”

Nate looked at the coat. Her pale face and visible shivering worried him. Instead of allowing her to push him away, Nate put his coat over her shoulders and helped put her arms through the sleeves. She might never accept his offer of marriage, he couldn’t force her to do so, but he could keep her from certain death by giving his coat. He’d heard of women refusing offers of marriage. But multiple refusals to the same man meant either he was determined, or she was headstrong.

Kneeling upon the ground, water soaking through his britches, Nate shook his head in frustration. Was there anything he could say to

help her understand the only obstacle in their path was her refusal? He would defy Norwood without a backward glance if Lilith would accept him as a husband and protector.

“Nate!” Norwood’s voice interrupted the thoughts swirling in his mind. His father would rightly fear an offer of marriage to be made in haste; what he wouldn’t expect was for his son to be refused.

Standing so he could introduce Lilith to the man who’d arrived at Woodland Manor, Nate felt a figurative punch to his gut as Lilith cried out.

“Papa!”

Nate stood frozen in place watching the reunion. Lilith ran to the man she’d called *papa*, and threw her arms around him. Although her head was buried in his shoulder, the sobs wrenching from her throat were deafening.

It took Lilith a moment to calm down, which allowed Nate to take the place she’d been sitting, the cold wooden bench. He was in a confused daze. Only moments before, he’d thought the hope of marrying Lilith would be a fight against his father and societal expectations, but now if she really was the daughter of Duke Somerset, all paths to happiness were open.

Duke Somerset’s eyes glistened as he looked to Norwood. “I thank you for your assistance so far. Will you please point me to a reputable inn? My daughter has need of food and warmth.”

Norwood cleared his throat. “I insist you both stay at Woodland Manor. Samuel will ride back and have a room and warm bath prepared for Lady Lilith. Leigh will ride for a physician at my expense. Her condition is due to a misunderstanding in my home.”

Somerset held his hands up to stop the apology. “There is no need. As I understand the situation, Lilith did not divulge her parentage upon her employment.”

Lilith stood with her head still buried in her father’s shoulder. She’d told Nate her father had passed away. He wanted answers. He needed to hear the reasoning behind the daughter of a duke taking the position of scullery maid.

“Our home is open to you and your daughter as long as it is needed. The storm will worsen before we get back to the manor. It is best we take our leave.”

“Thank you.” Somerset visibly tightened his hold on Lilith. As he turned toward his carriage, Somerset looked upon Nate with pity.

Nate didn’t want pity. He needed to see Lilith safe and warm. He kept his eye on Somerset as the footman with the carriage provided blankets. As soon as he was satisfied with Lilith’s care, Nate turned to see his father and brothers standing in their same spots. For a moment, he was ashamed of himself. He’d worried over her condition

and stood in the snow without a coat for she still had his wrapped around her shoulders and she hadn't had the courtesy of saying anything in appreciation. His anger with Norwood deflated and he wanted to return home to Woodland Manor to hide away in his room. He'd made an absolute fool of himself.

"Nate, we will speak in private when we return home." Norwood turned without giving a hint of what he was thinking.

"Yes, my lord."

Unable to hide the smile on her face, especially when she looked to her father, Lilith beamed with pleasure. There would be time for her to question him and find out how the ill-fated news had reached her mother the previous year, but for now she would bask in the happiness of having her father back.

The change in her situation was apparent within minutes of settling into the guest chambers. Her lady's maid had traveled with her father and was ready once again to care for her needs. With a hot bath and a salve on her hands, Lilith lay in a soft bed with two warming pans by her feet and a large fire crackling across the room. She reflected upon the ups and downs of life. She'd learned about cruelty over the past year starting with her uncle, the loss of lifetime friendships, the bullying below stairs, and losing her position as maid after being told she wasn't suitable for Lord Norwood's son. All of it caused a deep pain she would have to overcome.

With the thought of Nate, tears formed in the corners of her eyes.

"Are those tears of sadness or joy?" her father asked.

She was thankful he'd chosen to stay in her chambers and eat with her. She'd missed him, and had a number of questions to ask, now that she was no longer in danger of hypothermia.

"A mixture."

"Are some of them for Mr. Richardson?"

Lilith nodded and looked down at her hands. Would her father understand the emotions at war within her heart? "I fear I love him more than he does me."

Her father smirked and shook his head. "You did not see the gallant way he chased after you. Give it time. He will find a way to win your trust."

"He had it, until I was so rudely thrown out of Woodland Manor last night. Papa, I had to sleep in an alley. I nearly froze."

"A situation out of Mr. Richardson's control. Once you are rested you will see clearly."

Lilith sniffled. "I want to believe you. I should believe you. But you were dead and suddenly you are here."

Her father handed her a handkerchief and shifted in his chair until he looked comfortable before telling her what she needed to hear.

"It was a simple misunderstanding. The ship I was on blew off course during a terrible storm. We landed on the Dutch West Indies instead of India. After making repairs, we set off again and when we arrived in India, we received word of our demise. Unfortunately, by the time word was sent to Bradley House, your uncle had taken his place and you know the rest of the situation."

"A simple misunderstanding." She repeated his words and shook her head with disagreement. "It may have been a mistake, but the consequences were far worse than simple. Your death broke everything within mother and our family."

"I will ensure it never happens again."

"How can you? One day you will leave this earthly body and we will again be ousted from Bradley House."

"I assure you that will not be the case. I have put measures in place with my solicitor to rectify such an outcome in the future."

Lilith rested against her pillow, trusting her father was right. He was a duke. He should know how to prevent such a miscarriage of justice.

"Mama and my sisters, where are they?"

"Safe at Bradley House. They wanted to come, but I thought it best I traveled quickly to retrieve you."

"I am thankful you did." Nervously, Lilith looked at her father. She needed to confess the source of her funds for travel. "Papa, I had to sell your compass. I know you asked me to keep it safe. But I had no money, and I was hungry and in need of transportation."

"There is no need to worry. I have already retrieved the compass. I trust you will keep it safe?" He reached into his pocket and extracted the precious item she'd lamented losing.

"I promise."

"I have one question for you, before I leave for the evening."

"Leave? Where to?" He couldn't leave her, not after being dead for so long.

Patting her hand, he smiled and winked. "I have chambers across the hall. I will not be far. Now, answer this for me. When Mr. Richardson asks for my blessing, should I give it or make him suffer?"

Tears pierced Lilith's eyes and before she could stop them from falling, they hit her cheeks. If only her father had arrived two days previously, all would be different. She wanted to believe Nate loved her, but there was too much evidence to the contrary. When she'd finally confided in him about her position as scullery maid, everything they'd built had broken.

Gaining control of her emotions, Lilith wiped her nose. There was

no use in wiping her eyes as tears would fall long after her father left. "I think it is best you tell him no."

"You do realize he rode from town back to the manor without a winter coat because he gave it to you."

"Yes."

"And you still think that young man does not care for you?"

Lilith couldn't look at her father. Deep down, she knew Nate cared. He'd offered marriage more than once and had even offered it again at the coaching station before he knew her father was a duke. "Perhaps he does love me. Maybe I am the one who is not devoted enough."

"With that thought, I want you to rest. I will ask again in the morning."

Lilith agreed and watched as her father left the room. The day had gone from a nightmare to a wonderful dream and then back to a nightmare. She knew, although extremely tired, sleep would not come while she considered Nate.



He'd had a terrible night's sleep, if he'd slept at all. Most of the night, Nate tossed and turned with his eyes closed, thinking about the upcoming conversation with Lilith, Duke Somerset, and Earl Norwood. There was much to discuss given his and Lilith's friendship and her former position as scullery maid. She was the daughter of a powerful duke; Nate was certain he'd be engaged to her by midmorning to secure her reputation.

With a bounce in his exhausted step, he entered his father's den with the special license he'd procured while in London. The weight of parchment pressed against his chest, sending contentment through his body. There was no reason for Lilith to deny him now.

His mother and father stood near Lilith and the duke. Not wanting to interrupt the conversation, Nate stood back listening.

"Lady Lilith, I trust your every comfort was met last night?"

"Yes, Lady Norwood. I thank you for the extra heating pans. I do not remember a time I was as cold as when I arrived last night. You are very kind to ask."

Nate hadn't received two heating pans. He'd huddled in a blanket near his fire waiting for a hot bath as everyone had attended to Lilith, as was right.

Duke Somerset stood importantly next to his daughter. "We owe you a debt of gratitude for the lengths you went to securing Lilith's health last night."

"Do not think of it anymore. If it had not been for the misunderstanding with our staff, Lady Lilith would have been safe here at the manor when you arrived."

Nate wondered over the *misunderstanding*. How had his parents handled the butler and housekeeper for turning out a servant when they'd been instructed to leave her in the position? In his estimation, the misunderstanding wasn't simple and needed to be addressed.

Somerset nodded. "We will speak of it no longer. I trust I can depend upon you for discretion regarding my daughter's time at Woodland Manor?"

Norwood gave a curt nod. "Our children and the staff are under

strict instructions regarding her privacy. No one will be informed of the situation.”

“Then we have only the conversation with Nathaniel to attend to before leaving this morning.”

Nate wanted to question Somerset over his statement. Lilith couldn’t leave the Isle if they were to be married. He stepped forward ready to offer marriage as his hand intentionally moved to the outside of the pocket where the license was deposited.

“Then we should begin speaking. I have made myself plain to Lilith —”

Somerset didn’t allow Nate to speak further. In his booming voice, he commanded the attention of everyone in the room.

“Mr. Richardson, my daughter has informed me of the time she spent in your presence. I assume you will agree it was a friendship.”

Nate quickly agreed. “Yes, your grace. I consider her to be my best friend.”

“Wonderful. Then we can leave the Isle immediately. Not an ounce of harm has befallen either of your reputations.”

Nate looked to Lilith to see her eyes averted toward the wall behind him. He knew there wasn’t anything of interest on that wall. A door stood behind him and an ugly painting of the first Earl of Norwood hung on the wall.

“You plan to leave?” Nate had a hard time asking the question while holding back the hurt this statement caused.

Somerset answered. “Yes. We must leave now if we are to cross to the mainland before the hour is too late.”

Ignoring the duke, Nate kept his eyes on Lilith. “You agree with your father that all we shared was friendship? There was nothing more on your part?”

Lilith met his eyes with a forced smile. “I will always appreciate the time we spent discussing astronomy. I will look upon it as the reason I survived this chapter of my life.”

“You held no higher regard for me than friendship?”

Somerset put a hand on Lilith’s shoulder and guided her to a chair. “Mr. Richardson, I need not remind you of the differences in station.”

“You need remind me,” Norwood said, his voice gruff. “I am a member of the peerage. What prejudice do you have against a match between our children?”

“I have no prejudice, Norwood. I would gladly match my eldest daughter with your eldest son, but Samuel is already married. My daughter is expected to marry a titled man with lands and a position in Parliament.”

The weight of the special license in Nate’s pocket no longer held the position of talisman for his love. Instead, it was as though an anvil

sat upon his chest. Stepping backward, his foot hit into a chair. Nate fell into it, working to make sense of the words Somerset was speaking.

“Your youngest will inherit a small amount as he is the third son. It will be enough to see him through a few years. If he is particular in the wife he chooses, he can find one with a dowry to satisfy the demands of his pocketbook. A poor choice will leave him with a profession or a burden upon his eldest brother. I refuse to allow my daughter to live in either situation.”

“Your daughter’s dowry would be sufficient for them to live comfortably.”

“Certainly, but as I said, she will marry far above a third son.”

Somerset turned to Lilith and motioned for her to leave with him. Nate thought about standing, but his legs refused to move. It was very ungentlemanly of him, but he stayed in his seat while the woman he loved walked out of his life.

When he was finally able to move, Nate walked to his chambers, his mind replaying the words Somerset spoke. Nate imagined the conversation over and over with different outcomes, but in the end, nothing was changed. He was still the one left looking the fool.

A fire burned in the grate of his chambers. It took great effort to remove the parchment from his pocket, not because it was large or caught on the fabric, but because of the symbolic representation of that small piece of paper and his hopes for a bright future. He kept the sheet folded. The words would only sting and bring further distress to his broken heart. Nate dropped the license into the fire, hoping the pain of loss would burn along with it.



Nate’s initial reaction to Lilith and Somerset leaving was to hide in his chambers without a lamp. He sat for days in a chair, and looked up at the sky by night, reliving their conversations and wondering how he’d misunderstood everything he’d felt from her. Was the connection one-sided? Had she truly never cared for him at all?

It was easy to get lost in the torture of heartbreak. But he wasn’t one to dwell on unpleasantness. With a great effort, he pulled out of the reverie and grief of the relationship and turned to his original plans for a winter on the Isle.

With haste, Nate rushed down to the library. He needed a large piece of parchment and books. Climbing to the top of the ladder, Nate started at the top shelf sifting through topics of astronomy and mathematics.

“What are you doing?” Samuel asked, as Nate threw a book to the

ground.

“Looking for books.”

“I can see that. Why are you throwing them?”

Nate took a moment to look before dropping another. He didn’t want to injure his brother. “I have need of these books and do not care to travel up and down the ladder.”

“Why not read one at a time?”

“I have already read these books. My purpose is for deeper study.”

“Nate, I want to speak with you. Perhaps you can come down and give me a bit of your time.”

Nate shook his head. It’d been days since he’d had any energy at all and there was no way of knowing when his heart would break all over again and send him into a torrential downpour of anger. He needed to keep his mind busy to stop all emotions. Spying a book on Sir Isaac Newton’s Principles of Astronomy, Nate grabbed it and dropped it to the ground.

“I have not the time right now. We can speak once I have finished this project.”

“When do you expect to be finished?”

Taking a moment to consider, Nate looked down at his brother. “I plan to map the stars and find the mathematical equation to discover a new planet. It will be some time before I can speak with you.”

“Why? What will this do to mend your broken heart?”

Nate didn’t make an effort to look back down at his brother. “My heart is not broken. It was a misunderstanding and I have recovered. I fully intend to spend the rest of my life in scientific research. I plan to join the Royal Astronomical Society and I must show my intent by attempting to make a discovery.”

Nate moved to the next shelf and found two books for his research. Throwing them to the ground he continued the quest until he had more books than he could carry. Pushing them across the room to the waiting telescope, Nate ignored his brother’s continued presence as he opened the first book and started his research.

Kate knew her parents were angry with the cold reception she'd received upon entering the parlor. Moving toward an open spot on the sofa, she decided it was best to air her thoughts and receive their grievances so life could resume as normal.

"I did not know she was the daughter of a duke. If you are to be angry with anyone, let it be Nate. He fell in love with a servant." Kate looked away from her disapproving family and noticed Mr. Wells shaking his head.

"No one is angry with you." Norwood made his statement, then amended it before going back to his newspaper. "That is, we are not angry with your discovery of Lady Lilith and Nate's nighttime wanderings."

Kate glared at her father. "I should have thought this latest scandal would take precedence over mine. Can we not forget what happened so long ago?"

"No." Norwood didn't spare her a glance.

"Norwood, you do need to speak with the vicar. Banns should be posted for Kate and Mr. Wells."

Her mother's reminder sent a shiver of fear through Kate. She couldn't marry Mr. Wells. Certainly, it wasn't his fault she'd been assaulted when he'd neglected to offer a dance, but marriage to him would bring the memory back every time she had to see him.

"What about Nate and Lady Lilith? When will banns be posted for them?" Kate looked expectantly at the earl. He sat with his head buried in a newspaper.

"Where is Nate? I have not seen him since last night," Samuel asked.

Norwood put his paper down and looked toward the butler who stood by the door. "Jensen, where is Nate?"

"In the library, my lord. He is mapping the stars."

Norwood grunted, then went back to his newspaper. Kate wanted to shout and pull everyone out of the slump of solitude. The house was far too quiet for the number of people living in it. Since the duke and his daughter had left Woodland Manor, everyone had become

apathetic toward the scandal she'd discovered with Nate. Her revenge had amounted to nothing.

Looking at each occupant of the room, she found nothing of import to discuss outside of Nate and Lilith. Something had to be done to pull her brother out of his self-imposed isolation and forage into science. "Why is it that a woman of Lady Lilith's social standing can spend evenings with a man talking about science and kissing him without consequence to her reputation? I was witness to Lilith and Nate in a very compromising situation. If they are not forced to marry, I will tell everyone I know of her ruin."

This statement caught the attention of everyone in the room, but most importantly her father.

"What are you saying?" Norwood folded his paper and threw it on the table. "What did you witness?"

A light laughter built inside Kate as she noted Norwood's face turning red. She hoped it would go the same shade of purple she'd witnessed after her debacle in London. The joy filling Kate's entire body would carry her through the rest of the day. It wouldn't make her betrothal right, nor would it help her cope with the marriage. But causing another person distress was an amusement for the moment. Her hopes for joy increased as her father looked to Jensen.

"Jensen, I want Nate brought to me this instant." As the butler exited the room, Norwood turned on her. "Tell me what you witnessed."

"A kiss." When Norwood didn't explode, Kate increased her tale. "Passionate kissing. Why I thought I would die of shock it was so very inappropriate."

Norwood gave her a long, searching glare before moving forward in his chair. She wondered if he could see the inaccuracies in her statement. "We are dealing with a compromised reputation." Norwood slammed his fist against the arm of the chair. "I was certain we were free of such situations for now. When Duke Somerset discovers his daughter's ruin, there will be trouble."

A moment of doubt crept into Kate's mind as she watched her father's face go bright red. Nate was her favorite brother. She'd now betrayed him twice. A wave of guilt flashed through her mind, and she wondered if she had any redeemable qualities as her father yelled for Jensen to force Nate to the parlor.

Would Norwood send her and her siblings away, or would he force Nate to endure the ridicule of shame while they watched? Waiting was torture. She wanted to take everything she'd said since entering the parlor back. Looking to Mr. Wells, she noticed his raised eyebrows. If she'd interpreted correctly, he was disappointed in her.

What did his approval matter? It didn't. Yet, she suddenly found a

new sense of regret and she wanted his good opinion. The loss of whatever regard he'd once held for her caused a large amount of shame. Certain her cheeks were as deep a red as Norwood's, Kate wished she could bury her head in the ground like an ostrich. If she took the words back, he'd never trust anything she said again. He was bound to discover the truth of the situation. Nate hadn't ruined Lilith.

"Father, perhaps we should leave before Nate arrives. An audience is not needed." Kate hoped when Nate confronted her for her callous accusations, she could use this plea for his privacy as a way to stave off his anger. She deserved censure from him.

Norwood wasn't listening to anything more she had to say. He'd walked to the sideboard and poured a glass of brandy. It was a little early in the day for spirits.

When Nate entered the room in his shirt-sleeves with his hair rumpled and spectacles askew, Kate wanted to melt into the sofa she sat upon.

"Father?"

"Nathaniel, have you brought further scandal upon this family?" Norwood's accusation obviously caught Nate off guard as he pushed his spectacles up on his nose.

"I am unaware of what I have done now. You know everything that occurred between Lady Lilith and myself."

It surprised Kate to hear him refer to Lilith with her title. The relationship Nate had with the woman was more than enough for familiarity. Nate had been quiet since the duke and Lilith had left, but she was certain when they arrived in London that Nate and Lilith would mend the broken pieces of their relationship.

"You told me of stealing a few kisses. As I understand the situation, much more occurred."

Nate's face instantly colored, the pink of his cheeks making him look more exhausted than anything. "I cannot speak to what you have heard. What is the accusation?"

"Did you ruin Lady Lilith?"

The pink drained from Nate's face, and he turned toward Kate. "You are not finished casting aspersions upon my character? What did I do to you?"

Kate squirmed in her seat. "What makes you think I am the accuser?"

Nate's anger told her he wasn't impressed with her lie. "I only hope you do not plan to ruin Lilith's reputation. She does not deserve your callous attempts at taking the focus off of your indiscretions."

"Is it true?" Norwood yelled over her argument with Nate.

Kate knew she had to speak the truth. The pain in Nate's eyes brought the words bubbling out of her throat. "I misspoke."

Norwood turned to Mr. Wells. "I will have the banns posted without delay. If you do not care to back out of our agreement?"

Sudden fear gripped Kate's heart. If Mr. Wells backed out of the engagement, who would repair her reputation? She didn't want to marry him, and she had fought the forced arrangement up to moments before this, but now with the choice in the air and Mr. Wells's response unspoken, she wondered if she'd again pushed too far.

"I am a gentleman and I will not go back on our agreement." Mr. Wells turned to her. "I am disappointed in you, Kate. I hoped you would show more compassion toward your brother, since you destroyed his chance at happiness."

Unnerved by her concern over the marriage to Wells, Kate looked to Nate. "I do not know why I am so vicious. I will try to be better."

Nate turned and left without any response. Kate thought it was rather rude and would have commented on his obvious lack of decorum but found no one in her family would agree as they looked upon her with the same contempt. If she could melt into the sofa, it would have been the right time to do so.



While at Woodland Manor, there had been many times Lilith wanted to paint. The apple orchard and the night sky had created picturesque scenes she'd imprinted on her heart. Standing before a canvas brought those memories back, but it also brought back the haunted disappointment of Nate's eyes.

She missed his eyes. She missed everything about Nate.

With her paintbrush in hand, Lilith stood with a nearly finished rendition of the evening when she and Nate had discussed planetary movements. She thought of how the moon and stars constantly reflected off his spectacles and her heart ached with longing.

None of her actions made sense, since the moment she'd been turned out of Woodland Manor. A part of her lingered in the small bedchamber located in the servants' quarters. Although she no longer cleaned the chamber pots, which was a blessing, and her hands had healed from the harsh chemicals in the soaps, she missed her position because Nate was no longer a walk away.

Pressing her paintbrush to the canvas, Lilith made one last stroke to finish. With a final critical look at the scene she'd created, her heart soared for a quick second, then fell as she knew sharing a view like this would never again include Nate.

"It is beautiful. I have always thought you were a master painter."

Lilith turned to her mother. She'd missed her mother and sisters. A reunion with them had been everything her heart desired until she now felt the pain of a lost love. Now her heart ached for a man she would never see again. She wanted to be with Nate and to tell him she was sorry.

"Thank you, Mama. I do not think I will keep it."

The decision was made with haste because she knew every time she looked at the painting, it would lead to melancholy. She would remember the kind way Nate held her hand and the way he would ensure her comfort. Everything about the night sky would forever remind her of Nate.

"Oh? I think it is masterful. Perhaps I should keep it."

Lilith turned away from the painting to look at her mother. She'd

never mentioned Nate in any of her letters. Her nighttime meetings with him would have concerned the duchess. She wondered if her father had mentioned the youngest son of Earl Norwood. If he had, her mother hadn't indicated. It was all very unsettling. She needed to talk about her feelings, but she feared the conversation would bring tears that would never stop.

Her mother didn't wait for a response, and Lilith didn't know if she had the strength to give one. Keeping the painting, even if it were hidden away, would be torturous. There was always the chance of someone finding it and hanging it on a wall.

"Lilith, your time away from us must have been difficult. Speaking about it might help."

Forcing her lips into a smile, Lilith met her mother's eyes. "I am thankful to be home. Only last month I thought Bradley House was lost to us forever. When I was on the Isle of Wight, I missed you and my sisters. I longed for this life and for father to be with us again."

"We all missed you. But this is not why you are melancholy."

"Is it wrong for me to worry this could all happen again? Father will have to travel to India in the future. We are not secure in our station."

Her mother motioned for her to sit. If Lilith could successfully convince her mother the only ailment was the tenuous situation of their finances upon her father's untimely death, it would stave off the pain of speaking about Nate. Thinking about him was far too difficult. Would she be able to form words and actually allow them to escape her mouth?

"Your father and I have discussed the situation. He is currently working to put measures in place for our welfare. But, darling, the best way for you to find security is in a marriage. Your sisters are too young, but you are not. I have asked your father to seek a match and he has succeeded."

Lilith stood and moved away from her mother. Her heart raced, and she wondered if it were possible he'd gone back to Norwood and arranged a marriage for her and Nate. With all her heart she hoped he done so.

"With whom?"

"Duke Hargrove."

"Hargrove?" Lilith's shock at being matched with a man she didn't know came out with the squawk of his name.

"He is a wealthy and a kind man. Very unassuming. He only came into his title within the last few years."

"But I do not care for Hargrove." She'd met Duke Hargrove before her father's fateful trip to India. He'd spent an evening at their dinner table and hadn't spoken a word. Kind, he may be, but she didn't know

anything about him.

“Lilith, your father has taken great lengths to match you with Duke Hargrove. He will protect you, and over time, we believe you will find happiness.”

“I cannot marry where I do not love.”

Instead of commenting on her statement, her mother rested her hands on Lilith’s shoulders. “When you see your father next, you will thank him for this generous match. He is concerned for you and your sisters.”

Unable to speak as tears formed in her eyes, Lilith nodded her agreement. How had her father misunderstood everything so completely? She’d told him Nate was the one she loved, but then she’d also refused to accept a marriage proposal from him. It was possible she’d been the cause of all this internal suffering.

Turning back to the painting, Lilith could no longer allow it to stay in the house as it was. The memories of Nate would torture her enough. A painting of one of the most amazing nights of her life would be unendurable. With haste, before she could decide against the action, Lilith placed her hands in the paint left on her palette and mixed the colors together. When her hands were covered in the acrylics, she ran them over the canvas destroying the memory of her time with Nate.

The destroyed project and the downpour of tears through her agony left her fatigued. Lilith slowly made her way to her bedchamber to rest. She refused to think of Hargrove, and she pushed Nate to the back of her mind. He would stay there for eternity. A memory to cherish and fear because she would never forget him.

Kate's plan had more of an effect on Nate than she'd originally expected. Certainly, she'd hoped to cause him pain and to see the tortured expression upon his face, but she didn't want him to be despondent—Nate, the brother who'd protected her since her first season when everything had gone wrong, the brother who stood up for her when the rest of the family found her impertinent was ill at ease.

Physically he looked drained. His constant study of star charts and books had become an obsession to keep his mind on anything but his heart. Kate sat back watching her family as they stood by helpless to assist. She felt only hopelessness.

"Nathaniel does not look to be improving," Mr. Wells observed while taking a seat next to her. "Is there nothing your father can do to help?"

Putting up her defenses, Kate had no desire to confide in Mr. Wells. Reminding herself of Nate's intrusion, which had resulted in her engagement to the detestable man beside her, Kate lost all sympathy for the torture her brother endured. "Perhaps he deserves to be miserable."

"Are you not concerned for his health?"

Kate scoffed and turned away. "Why should I be? His feverish mapping of stars is the result of Lady Lilith torturing his soul."

"Kate, your hollow assessment of Nathaniel's situation causes me concern. Do you not care for his wellbeing?"

Turning back to the man she once thought fully detestable, she now wondered at his motivations as he'd been given a way out of the match. Kate gave him a look of disgust. However, she couldn't show weakness in the walls she'd built against him. "Nate's heart is broken. I assume he is moping. It is all an act. There is nothing to concern myself over."

Mr. Wells raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Have you always been so shallow?"

Meeting his gaze with contempt, Kate smirked. "Does this change your mind on our engagement?"

“My only reasons for marrying you are the promised dowry I will receive and my commitment to Lord Norwood. I knew before I agreed to the arrangement you were the worst sort of female within the *ton*. My family needs the financial security and rise in station. So, in answer to your question, no Kate, my promise to your father has gone unchanged. We will be married in the spring.”

“I will do all in my power to ensure we are not.”

“I wonder, when you are addressed as Mrs. Wells if your haughty superiority will dissolve.”

“That, sir, will never happen. I can assure you for I will always retain my title and be referred to as Lady Kate.”

Mr. Wells leaned toward her. “Oh, but it must. Otherwise, you will have a difficult time living in Liverpool.”

She wanted to give a grand retort, but Mr. Wells moved across the room to sit by Leigh and Samuel. He’d surprised her. Although a gentleman by definition, Mr. Wells wasn’t part of the peerage and therefore shouldn’t have kept his composure when verbally sparring with her. But he’d held his own. It wouldn’t make her like him, ever, but for a small moment she found him less detestable than she had in the past.



Kate stood by the library door looking in at her brother as he frantically searched through his notes. Nate looked increasingly dreadful each day. Uncertain of when he slept last, she needed to make amends and apologize for her part in his current misery. She nearly slipped into the room but stopped as the door on the other side of the library opened and her father cleared his throat to gain Nate’s attention.

“I am busy at the moment. I have not time for a chat.” Nate threw a book over his shoulder and continued his search.

“It will only take a moment. Then you can continue your search for another planet.” Norwood’s voice was tender. It had been a long time since Kate had heard her father speak with such gentleness; she was taken aback.

Nate looked up. From the hall she could see his unshaved face and bags under his red eyes, and she wondered if it was a hint of madness creeping into his doleful expression. He sat on the floor with his legs crossed, bare feet, and his shirt sleeves displayed. He wasn’t expecting company in such a state.

“I received a letter from Duke Hargrove today.”

Nate looked back at his books. “I went to Cambridge with Hargrove. Why is he writing to you?”

“He writes to our family. It is an invitation to his upcoming wedding.”

This information not only brought Nate’s attention back to the conversation, but it made Kate grateful she’d stayed. Hargrove finding a match was a surprise to her. He was handsome enough, but his quiet demeanor set her nerves on end. He rarely spoke, and when he did, it was slow with careful planning.

“I am happy for him. When you attend, you can inform him I am dedicated to my study of the stars at this time and cannot find the time to get away.”

“Nate, please stop what you are doing and look at me.” Norwood moved to one of the chairs by the telescope and Nate’s position on the floor. He waited until Nate was focused on their conversation before continuing. “The lady he plans to marry is Lady Lilith Bradley.”

Kate expected Nate and Lilith to meet again in London. She’d even spent time planning the moment, as she would orchestrate everything if needed, but hearing that Lilith was engaged to Hargrove, was a surprise. Remembering she stood silently by the door, Kate looked over to see her brother and father in quiet conversation. She could no longer hear what they said, and she was surprised to see her father had moved off the chair to sit on the floor and search through books with Nate.

It had been a long time since Earl Norwood had taken such pains to spend time with her. Was this her doing? Had she caused the separation she now felt within her family? It was obvious they all enjoyed Mr. Wells’s company more than hers. She’d spent little time with her family, since most of her days at the manor had been in an effort to plot Nate’s social demise as the favorite child.

Now that she’d fully succeeded, Kate realized she’d taken her revenge too far. It was obvious to her; she was the one with the problem. Leaving her father and brother as they worked to find whatever scientific information Nate lacked to complete his calculations, Kate walked out to the clearing where she’d followed Nate and Lilith so many times. It was early in the day, so there weren’t any stars, but this was where she’d seen an enviable relationship. This was where she’d realized everything she wanted out of a marriage. This was also where she concluded that it was out of her reach.

An evening of dancing seemed like torture. His mother promised not to push him into the ballroom, for which he was thankful. The end of winter hadn't lasted long enough for his heart to heal. He'd spent the last weeks on the Isle mourning what could have been. Telescopes, stars, periodicals, and anything scientific reminded him of Lilith. His study of mapping out the sky and finding another planet was still a focus, but his mother wanted him in London and so he'd agreed. In London, he could find mindless pursuits to mask the ache throbbing in his chest.

"How long do you plan to stand on the outskirts?" Diana stood prettily next to him in a new gown commissioned for the dance. Duke and Duchess Waverly's home was overcrowded as usual.

"Perhaps the rest of my life. I have no desire to make small talk and feign interest in any lady."

"Oh."

He looked down at his sister. Although she was eldest, he was taller. "What about you? Why are you not dancing?"

"At my age?"

"Yes. All of the men in this room are fools."

Diana shook her head. "They are looking for women who are younger. It is what all the men do."

"I will stand up with you. If you will dance with me?"

Diana smiled. "I worried you would not understand my subtle hints."

"There is no need to be subtle. I am your brother, and it is my pleasure to dance with you."

Nate led her onto the floor. For the short duration of the activity, his mind was able to focus on something other than the misery in his heart. He smiled and laughed at the lively dance and conversation with his sister until he noticed Kate leaving the ballroom.

"Diana, I need to see after Kate. She has left with Mr. Grey."

"I will come with you."

He wanted to argue but decided against it as speed was necessary. He, out of all of his siblings, was the one Kate had confided in

regarding Mr. Grey and his actions during her first season. The reason she would have for leaving the ball with him was alarming.

Nate held his hand out to Diana and escorted her toward the exit. They followed the couple with haste, finding them only once Kate's voice could be heard.

"Your threats do not concern me. Mr. Wells does not care a wit for me or my reputation."

"Norwood would not want the information I have about your misdeeds to be announced days before your nuptials. Make me an offer, and I will let you know if it is enough for my silence."

Nate cleared his throat as he rounded the corner. Kate stood against the wall her face pale taut in fear. "Mr. Grey, threatening my sister will do nothing for you."

"I will take my complaints to Earl Norwood then."

"Nate will duel you, if you continue to insist on ruining my reputation." Kate kept her eyes averted so he could not silently argue.

"Kate, why would you say such a thing?" Diana gasped, her hand covering her heart.

"A duel? I did not realize Norwood's bookworm son was capable of being a champion. Tell me, will you wear the spectacles or leave them behind?"

Nate walked forward and held his arm out for Kate so he could escort her back to the dance. "My sister spoke out of turn. I will not duel you."

"But the challenge has been accepted. We can take care of this right now."

Nate turned back to the man and shook his head. "I do not have a weapon on me."

"No matter. Tomorrow morning. Greenwich at dawn. I'll bring the weapons."

"He will be there." Kate again spoke for him.

Instead of responding, Nate pulled Kate back to the ballroom with Diana by their side. "What madness has taken over your mind? I will not duel with Mr. Grey."

"When I need a champion, my dearest brother should be willing to stand up for me. Instead, you make me look the fool. Nate, you will best him at the sword. You are better than all of our brothers and Mr. Grey is a wretched man."

"You thought it would be with swords. You are possessed. Mr. Grey will bring his weapon of choice, which leaves me in no doubt as to it being a revolver."

"But you have the ability to shoot properly. Keep your aim straight and all will be right."



Exasperated by Kate's careless assessment of his life, Nate asked the two questions plaguing his mind. "What if he is allowed to shoot first? And if I win the first shot, how will I live knowing I have killed a man?"

Kate rolled her eyes showing her lack of morals. "You think far too much. Kill him for my honor. No one will question your motivations."

Nate watched as Kate walked away, Diana stood next to him. He would not be able to live with himself if he killed a man, justified or not.

"You will not go in the morning?" Diana squeezed his arm to pull his attention back to her.

"No. Once Grey sobers and realizes what he has done, he will back out of the duel as well."

Nate took Diana back to stand with their mother and father before he left for air. He stood on the veranda, his eyes moving up to the night sky as the pain he'd temporarily forgotten dropped back into the pit of his stomach. Allowing his thoughts to turn to Lilith, he wondered if she would be at the party. Was it possible they were in the same building?

"Nate?" Norwood's voice broke through his pain. "What is this I hear about Mr. Grey and a duel?"

Nate turned to see his family converging on his solitude. "I did not elicit the fight. Kate saw to the arrangements."

"You plan to meet him?" Norwood yelled, but calmed as Lady Norwood put a hand on his arm and reminded him, they were in public.

Nate shook his head with vigor. "No, my lord. I did not agree to the exercise."

A visible relief went through the group, and Nate wondered if his behavior had been so erratic over the last weeks to make his family think a duel was necessary.

"Come back to the ballroom. I do not want you out here by yourself." His mother took hold of his hand and pulled him toward the open door. Instead of arguing, Nate allowed her to guide him back to the heated room where the music was loud, there was little space to walk, and he would hold up a wall.

He'd told his father the truth, he wasn't planning on championing for Kate but when his eyes fell upon Lilith as she danced with Duke Hargrove, a recklessness entered his soul. Her dark brown hair fell in perfectly-formed curls around her face, and a diamond hair clip held the rest upon the top of her head. She glowed, and he wanted to do something daring. A duel was the perfect solution.

Mornings were still cold as spring was barely upon England, but Nate was determined to rid his mind and heart of the pain. He'd never been brash in his actions. His brain worked with logic over emotions for the most part, so the desire for foolhardy behavior was somewhat new.

He needed a second. Instead of dragging his valet into the fray, Nate decided Leigh was his only choice. Nate quietly turned the doorknob and entered Leigh's bedchamber to find his brother dressed and waiting.

"What are you doing up so early?" Nate asked, looking around the room and spotting Samuel as well.

"When your eyes landed on Lady Lilith last night, we knew you would need an outlet for the pain. We will not let you duel Grey." Leigh sat in his chair with a satisfied grin on his face.

"I need a second. Which one of you will accompany me?"

"Neither." Samuel said, his temper rising. "Nate, this is not the solution to what you feel for Lilith. Call upon her. Try to speak reason to her."

"She is engaged. It is all over."

"Nothing is permanent until the wedding. Call upon Hargrove. He is one of your friends. He cannot marry the woman you are attached to." Samuel's reasoning made sense, but the pain in his chest was too great to allow this opportunity with Grey to pass.

"Leigh, will you come with me?"

Leigh looked to Samuel and spoke as if Nate were not present. "Perhaps I can stop him once we are there. If he sees the weapons, he may swoon."

"I will not swoon. I am not a coward."

"Fine. We will all go. And if one of us dies in this ridiculous duel, I hope you will find it within your heart to feel something other than longing for a woman who refused your many offers of marriage."

Samuel's words should have made Nate turn back to his bedchamber, but they didn't. Instead, Nate found a surge of excitement for the adventure, which carried him through until he arrived at Greenwich. Seeing Mr. Grey standing in the distance put the fear that should have been inside him from the moment the duel was suggested into his entire body. His hands shook as he dismounted and led his horse to a tree to tie him off.

"There is still time to turn back." Samuel's calm demeanor made Nate shake his head.

He wouldn't allow Grey and his second to think Nate was a coward. Samuel and Leigh might be gentle if Nate backed out of the duel. But what would happen when the story was retold to the family? He'd be ashamed of his lack of bravery. He had to see this through to the end.

Nate turned at the sound of an approaching horse. His eyes went wide as Mr. Wells dismounted.

"What are you doing here?" Nate asked. This was not a source for morning entertainment.

"I hoped to find you were not here. I will not allow you to champion for Kate. She is to be my wife and therefore, I will do it." Wells took his coat off for the fight.

Nate laughed. "Tell me what you think this duel is about. If you are correct, I will allow you to stand premier for my sister."

Wells sighed. "Nate, I know Kate put you into this situation."

"But you have not an inkling as to why I have agreed." He pointed to his brothers who stood beside them. "These two believe I have a wish for adventure to heal my broken heart. You think it is Kate's doing. But not one of you understands why I am here. Therefore, you do not get the honor of shooting Mr. Grey."

Nate knew without a doubt the weapon he would choose would be the swiftest execution for the loser. He didn't want to see Grey suffer with a sword wound, and he also didn't care to die a long-drawn-out death. If this duel was to the death, it would be swift and with as little pain as possible.

Grey walked forward, his lips twitching in an upward curve. "I did not expect you to be so punctual. You are a surprisingly stupid man. Who will act as your second?"

Nate steadied his hands against his legs hoping his voice wouldn't shake. It was a surprise when he spoke without a twitch of fear in his voice.

"Leigh will act as my second."

"Then I suggest Samuel and Wells should stay with the animals." When Grey was satisfied with the distance from the duel, he turned to face Nate. "I will allow you to pick the weapon."

Nate took a deep breath to steady his increasing nerves as he looked at the choices. "What are the glasses of water for?"

"Poison."

Nate shuddered at the sincerity in Grey's voice. If he'd questioned the intent of the fight up to that point, he'd now had his answer. This duel was to the death. He looked at the parlor pistols and swords. Killing Grey would be despicable, but he was the one who chose to leave the safety of home.

The rising sun glinted off the barrel of the gun, and Nate remembered the sparkling clip in Lilith's hair the night before. He made his decision. He wanted the duel to be quick. "Pistols."

"What?" Leigh grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around. "You could have chosen the swords."

Nate didn't respond. He took the pistol from Grey's outstretched

hand and walked to the starting point. Counting off his paces, Nate's devil-may-care attitude toward his personal anguish took on greater meaning. This could be his last moment on earth, if Grey shot straight.

As the instructions were yelled for him to turn around, Nate did as was required, raised his arm, and pointed the gun, but he'd taken too long. Before he was able to squeeze the trigger, Grey's gun released, and Nate found the pain of a bullet to be much more pleasant than losing Lilith.

Lying on the ground, Nate looked up to see Leigh standing over him, pistol in hand. "Tell me why you wanted to kill Grey." Leigh demanded.

Nate blinked. He was alive. The pain in his side was excruciating. This wasn't a quick way to die. It was terrible. As he continued to lay on the ground, he tried to speak. Someone in his family had to avenge Kate. Even if it was five years later.

"He— He—" Nate was stumbling over his words. The blue of the spring morning sky drifted in and out of his sight as his brothers and Mr. Wells yelled at him to speak. It was very confusing. "He forced Kate."

It was all he could say in the moment. He closed his eyes but was painfully aware of sounds and the cold grass beneath his body. Death wasn't as easy to obtain as he'd hoped. He wanted to quickly drift off into nothingness and use the stars as a tool to look down upon his family. For him, heaven would be found amongst the stars and wonders in the sky.

His mind pulled out of darkness as he heard an argument among his brothers. Did they understand what he'd told them? Did they realize Kate's entire life had changed by the actions of the man standing a few feet away from them? The same man who had been Nate's undoing as well.

The sounds of the argument moved away, or perhaps he was the one leaving the scene, he didn't know. But it was terribly cold and dark from his position on the ground, and it wasn't at all what he thought death would be. For he expected angels and God to be waiting just beyond the life he was leaving.

Lilith was young, or so her parents kept repeating those words each time they thought she couldn't hear. Did she regret the argument with Nate and her abrupt departure from Woodland Manor? With all her heart. And when she saw him standing against the wall at Duke and Duchess Waverly's gazing in her direction, she wanted to crumble to ash and blow away in the wind, yet somehow, she kept dancing, and then he was gone.

Her erstwhile friends welcomed her with open arms now that she was no longer poor. If they'd known she spent the last months as a scullery maid, all the money in England wouldn't be enough to restore their fair-weathered friendship. It was difficult standing in a ballroom next to people she knew would abandon her the moment anything unpleasant arose. Loss of wealth and reputation topped the list of unpleasant acts. There wasn't much to speak about, but again, this was one of the reasons her parents believed she was young. They understood the positive and negative within Society and had forgiven their acquaintances for abandoning the duchess and her girls during their time of need.

Listening to her parents discuss her broken heart, impending marriage, and lack of trust for those in Society almost made a lightness fall upon her—almost. She sat in the library with the window open, her parents on the veranda. Since her father's return, her parents had taken more time to be together. It was nice.

"She may be young in our eyes, but eighteen is a perfect time for marriage and she will come to understand the tenuous position we all hold in Society." Her father was correct about marriage. A great many debutantes were married by the age of sixteen. Her mother was only sixteen when they'd married. She'd had Lilith soon after, which left her parents rather young. As for Society and fair-weathered friends, it would take more than one evening to restore trust.

"This last year was difficult on her. Be patient, Somerset."

Thinking over the past year, her only regret was Nate. She'd done everything wrong from keeping her identity a secret to initiating a kiss and then to breaking his heart. She'd like to think she wasn't the only

one suffering.

"I do not know if I can force the marriage with Hargrove. He is the best opportunity for our daughter—"

"She loves Nathaniel."

Her mother's simple statement brought tears to her eyes.

"I will speak with Hargrove. We might be able to match him with Rayne."

Rayne was only fifteen. It was not right to marry her off so young. Lilith's heart leaped at the thought of finding love and comfort with Nate, but worried over her younger sister marrying Duke Hargrove for the comfort of their family. Duty was a tremendous hinderance to love.

"If that young man does not ask her to dance at tonight's soiree, I will speak with Norwood. Although we smoothed the possible ruin away with fancy talk, I believe he has a duty to my daughter. He kissed her, and spent time alone with her."

"You stole kisses from me before we were wed. Do not think the younger generation is above such moments."

Her father grunted. This meant he agreed with his wife. "If your father had known I stole a kiss, he'd have made certain we were married the very same night. I did not force Lilith into a decision. I allowed her to choose."

"I do not blame you, but she chose wrong. Her heart aches for Nathaniel, even if she refuses to admit it. I worry she will never forgive herself if his mother matches him with another lady."

"Is there a possibility of that happening anytime soon?"

"I spoke with Lady Norwood. She has promised to leave Nathaniel for the time. She confided in me over his current situation. He is tortured with the news of Lilith's engagement to Hargrove. We must end it before he does anything rash."

"He is a third son. What could he do so quickly?"

"Lady Norwood spoke of his traveling to the states. If he leaves, the American women will not discriminate upon his status of third son. He could marry before he returns."

Lilith closed her eyes, hoping Hargrove could find another match and worrying that Nate's plans to leave England would come to fruition before all was resolved.

Gathering courage, she walked out to the veranda and stood before her parents. "Mama. Papa. I have need of your help." She didn't wait for them to ask questions. Instead, she rushed on hoping they would understand her need. "I made a terrible mistake when I refused Nathaniel."

"Which time?" Her father's smile told her it was meant as a jest, but she took it very seriously.

“Every time.” She burst into tears, calmed herself, gulped, and continued her request. “I cannot go through with a marriage to Hargrove, nor another soir  e knowing he is unaware of my feelings. Can we please go to Lord Norwood’s home so I can speak with Nate?”

Her father adjusted uncomfortably in his chair. “It is inappropriate for you to declare yourself.”

“I fear he will not speak to me again. Not after the last argument we had. Papa, I told him I never loved him, and I only wanted his fortune to improve our situation.”

Her mother sat forward and took her hand. “Why would you have made such a terrible remark?”

“I do not know. I was so confused and angry over being turned out. I had spent an entire night sleeping in a cold alley fearing that at any moment I would be robbed or killed from the elements. Not to mention starvation.” She knew her statement sounded dramatic, but it was all true. She’d allowed her insecurities to push Nate away.

“I will send for the carriage, if you are in earnest.”

Looking at her father, she straightened her shoulders and stood with perfect posture. “I am, your grace.” She had to ask one more question before they could continue forward. “What about Duke Hargrove?”

“I will handle Hargrove.” Her father patted her hand, calming her worries for a short moment.

As soon as the carriage arrived at the front of the house, Lilith rushed out, knowing her courage would only last so long. She would break tradition and throw herself at the mercy of Nate’s feet, begging forgiveness, if only he would tell her she had occupied his every thought since last they met. For she’d been plagued with his face in her mind ever since that fateful winter morning as the carriage drove away.

The drive to Ingram House was excruciating as she considered what she was doing. The doubt building in her mind with each passing street put a lump in her throat. Would she be able to speak once she was standing in front of him?

As her father knocked on the door, Lilith took hold of her mother’s arm. She looked at the budding tulips in the garden— spring was certainly upon them— and then she entered the house and followed her parents and Jensen into the parlor. Exchanging a nervous smile with the butler, Lilith took a seat, her legs and hands fidgeting.

“Duke Somerset.” Lord Norwood bounded into the parlor with an energy of a young man. She noticed he’d lost a bit more of his stomach since last she’d been at Woodland Manor. “What brings you to our home so early in the morning? The hour for visiting is not yet, and it should be my son visiting your daughter.”

“Yes, well, Lilith did not think he would visit due to the last time they spoke. Is Mr. Richardson at home for visitors this morning?”

Norwood turned to Jensen. “Send for Nate.”

“My lord, your sons are not at home this morning.”

Lord Norwood looked back at Lilith and raised his eyebrow, then turned back to the butler. “What do you mean? Where would all three of my sons have gone so early?”

“I believe, my lord, there was a meeting this morning.”

Lilith knew Jensen was stalling. Her time as a servant told her the information would make his employer angry. As the one to tell Lord Norwood, he might worry the anger would be misplaced.

“What do you know, Jensen?”

“I believe they set out for Greenwich to meet a Mr. Grey.”

Lilith didn’t understand the significance of the statement, but Lord Norwood’s pale face told her this trip was not a casual ride across town.

“How long ago did they leave?”

“Before sunrise, my lord.”

Norwood took a step back and turned to Lilith and her parents. “I fear you will have to make this visit at another time. My son is—”

His words cut off as the door to the front of the house slammed open shaking the walls. Lilith’s heart stopped as Lord Samuel and Mr. Leigh Richardson and Mr. Wells carried Nate’s unconscious body into the house.

“Jensen, send for a surgeon,” Leigh yelled.

Norwood and her father rushed forward taking the load of Nate’s body from his brothers. She wanted an explanation and wanted to know where Nate was injured as there was a significant amount of blood, but she couldn’t see the point of origin.

Lilith watched as Lady Norwood rushed into the parlor and set to work with Lilith’s mother to find the wound.

“I told you not to meet Mr. Grey.” Norwood’s voice sounded over the fury surrounding Nate’s unconscious form.

“I know, father. Unfortunately, Nate was determined. We could not let him go alone.”

“What did this adventure prove? Kate is still ruined and will have to marry Mr. Wells. Nate could very well lose his life, all for a sister who did not care enough about him to see to his happiness.”

Until Lord Norwood said the obvious, Lilith hadn’t thought of Nate never waking. She was convinced the surgeon would put him to right with medication or whatever was needed; her thoughts drifted off as her mother stood and her view was no longer prohibited from seeing Nate’s injury. His cloak had previously covered the spot on his hip.

With a hand over her mouth, Lilith found her way to the sofa and



sat with her head turned away. She couldn't handle the sight of so much blood.

"He has been more than a little depressed over the last month. It is not a surprise he wanted to do something reckless," Samuel responded.

"And what of Mr. Grey? Did Nate hit him? I need to know what legal trouble has been brought upon this house."

A loud harumph sounded, and Lilith turned to see which of Nate's brothers had made the noise. Leigh's angry, red face told her he was responsible for the ghastly sound. "The gun Nate was given did not work. Nate was a target. If Samuel had not taken his own weapon, I think we would all be lying on that patch of grass in Greenwich."

"An illegal duel where one side cheated. Sounds accurate," Norwood grumbled.

Lilith didn't know what to do, other than to stay where she was: frozen to the sofa. She wanted to follow the group carrying Nate up to his chambers, but she'd only be underfoot. Lord Samuel's words came back to her mind, and Lilith realized she'd been the driving force in Nate's decision of recklessness. He'd participated in a duel because he needed to focus his attentions from a broken heart onto something else. She would never forgive Nate if he died, nor would she forgive herself.

Nate kept his eyes closed as he heard the whispered words of people around him. His last memory was of being shot. In truth he could still feel the pain, and it was dreadful. He'd wanted something to distract his heart, and he'd found it. He would have enough time to consider the irrational need for danger as he healed. For now, he needed to focus on the people around him. Although he was certain he lay in a bed, he didn't know if he was home. Could he have lost all sense of feeling and direction; and was he still on the grass in Greenwich? Was Grey standing over him waiting for him to die?

His hands rested on what he thought was material— soft and relaxing, if not for the continued speaking in his chambers. Where he'd thought they were whispering before, as he neared consciousness, the speaking became louder.

Focusing on one voice, Nate recognized his father. Lord Norwood wouldn't be happy, especially since Nate had chosen to attend the duel. He listened, his mind needing an outlet other than his throbbing leg.

"Kate, this will not delay your union to Wells. If anything, it will cause me to push the date forward. You were reckless. Do you not care for your brother? He has stood by your side for years defending you when no one else would, and you sent him to his death."

Was he dying? This concerned Nate. He forced his eyes open. The lids were heavy, and his vision blurred, but he was awake. He was alive, in spite of his father's assumption that he was dying.

"I did not think. Mr. Grey has caused me considerable anguish since my first season. When he is near, I lose my head. He frightens me and I cannot form a decent thought. I did not mean for this to happen."

"What would cause you so much anguish you would sacrifice your brother's honor? Once the duel was issued, he had to attend." This was his mother's voice.

Nate groaned. Kate wasn't fully to blame for his current situation. He was responsible for his own actions. His eyes fell upon Lilith sitting next to him, and he realized he must be dreaming. She sat next to

Diana, who was next to his other sisters: Adele, Rilla, and Lady Trenton.

“Nate!” Lilith cried out as she grabbed his arm.

He again groaned. “Where am I?”

“You are home.” Leigh’s face moved in front of his vision, and he could no longer see Lilith.

But it was perfectly fine, as she’d been part of a dream. He’d even remembered her voice with perfection as his name on her lips was like balm to his wounded heart. For a moment, he thought she’d touched him.

Kate pulled him into a very painful embrace. When he cried out, she slowly released him. “Nate. I did not mean to put you into such a situation. How could you face Grey without checking the weapon to ensure it would work? And why did you choose the guns? You are better with a sword.”

“I could not let you continue to fear that evil man. He needed to pay for his actions.”

“Nate, we can speak of it later. There is no need for you to say more.”

But he needed her to understand his reasons for going through with the duel. Nate’s vision turned in circles. Even as Kate gently touched his mouth and made a shushing noise.

“He ruined you. I will never forgive him, nor will I stand back and wait for Grey to injure another. He is the reason you have to marry Wells. Wells will protect you from cads like Grey.”

Nate knew he was rambling. His eyes were closing, but he hoped she understood why he had to defend her, even if it was years later. He could still remember the night she’d arrived home early from a party. He’d been on holiday from Eton and was reading in the library. He remembered her tear-stained cheeks. The sweet sister who cared for everyone and had never hurt anyone had been irrevocably injured by a rake.

Nate closed his eyes, if they’d ever been opened, and allowed his mind to drift back into sleep.

Kate watched as Nate drifted back to sleep while he continued to mumble. She hoped his words had been too slurred for anyone to fully understand what he'd said, but when she turned back to her father, everyone sat silently looking at her.

"He does not know what he is saying. It is the pain." Her excuse was weak, even in her own ears.

Everyone already suspected her loss of virtue, but the confirmation hadn't come until Nate, in a drug induced confession, shared what little he knew of the situation. She'd made him vow to keep her confidence, but in his condition, she couldn't hold him to it.

"You may tell your mother and myself in private."

Kate shook her head. It was best they all knew the truth so assumptions wouldn't be focused on and made greater. She looked at the floor, unable to meet the eyes of her father. Strangely, she chose to leave the introduction and her dislike of Wells out of her story. When she'd divulged everything, her father nodded his head.

"Grey is the reason you changed from the sweet, young lady your mother and I knew you to be, to what you are now."

Kate rolled her eyes. "If you mean cynical, irreverent, and hateful, you would be right. What man would want a ruined woman?"

No one answered and she wasn't looking for an insincere response. She'd lived with her ruin for years and over time had become the type of woman Mr. Grey created with his long-ago accusations.

"Nate was the only one home that night, which was why I told him. What could a fifteen-year-old do, other than keep my confidences?"

"Mr. Wells will need to be informed." Norwood was a man of action. Now that he had a plan in place, he left the sickroom.

Samuel stepped forward and took hold of her hand. Calling to their father, he shook his head. "Wells already knows. Nate told us after he was shot and before we took care of Grey."

"What do you mean?" Kate had to know what they'd done to Grey. A part of her wanted every detail, especially if it was horrific.

"As Leigh told father, I had taken a weapon of my own. Grey will

not hurt you or any other lady again.”

Kate moved to the only vacant chair to keep watch over her sleeping brother. Her thoughts caught up in a confusion of emotions. Wells now had full confirmation of her ruin. He knew some of the harrowing details of that night, but not in full, as she'd never given Nate the entire story. According to her brothers, Grey was no longer a threat. This was a burden lifted from her shoulders.

Now, she only had to wait for her brother to wake and enter full consciousness. He would need to be aware of his surroundings for she had a confession to make.



“What are you doing here?” Nate’s raspy voice pulled Kate from her thoughts. She hadn’t expected him to wake so soon.

“Nate, I should like to speak with you. If you are able.”

She didn’t have to fake timidity. Seeing him wince in pain, propped up on pillows, and his face the color of white bedsheets left her unsettled. Waiting for him to accept and give her audience was dreadful.

“If you must.”

“I never meant for any of this to happen. For you to be injured, for Lilith and you to end your relationship, and for everything else that has resulted from my selfish behavior.”

“Why do you have to make everything difficult for yourself and others?”

The truth was that she hated herself. How could she form the sentences to express the loathing that entered her heart each time she looked in a mirror? New dresses only increased her dislike, as they always had to be made over. She couldn’t share gowns with her sisters as she was much thinner than them all. As a woman amongst Society, it was difficult when you didn’t fit the mold. Women who were too thin, too fat, or had a smattering of freckles never had a chance with the decent men.

Instead, she gave the easiest answer. “I wanted you to feel as I did when you interrupted me and Mr. Swenson in the library. I was embarrassed and openly ruined. Before that moment, no one suspected my virtue was a thing of the past.”

She’d said almost everything there was to say, but found it was completely inadequate. “Please, forgive my stubborn behavior.”

“Stubborn?” Nate’s eyebrows raised with the question.

“Pigheaded?”

Nate shook his head. “Not a strong enough word.”

“Deuced fool.” She hung her head in shame.

Nate smiled and let out a raspy chuckle. "Do not allow father to hear you speak such profanity. He will have you sent to Wells for an impromptu wedding before morning."

Fully repentant, Kate took hold of her brother's hand. "Will you ever forgive me?"

"How can I not? You are my sister. I alone know what brought you to this end."

Kate shook her head with a strained smile. "Do you not remember what you said when you woke this evening?"

The concern on his face made her repentant for bringing it up. "No. Was I awake?"

"You rightfully told everyone about blasted Mr. Grey and what happened to me."

Nate weakly squeezed her hand. "Language, Kate."

"I will work on my profanity."

Nate's entire body shook as he laughed. She could see the pain in his eyes. Instantly worried that the conversation should have waited, Kate stood to find the nurse, but Nate didn't let go of her hand.

"I trust you mean to work on *not* using profanity."

"What fun would there be in such a promise?" She straightened his blankets and tucked them around his shoulders. His eyes were closing again, and she knew their conversation was coming to an end. "Nate do not die on me. I will do all I can to rectify my wrongs."

"Next time." Nate closed his eyes and she thought he'd gone back to sleep until he again spoke. "Let us have a conversation to work out a solution instead of torture."

Heat rushed to her face as she considered an answer. "I was humiliated when you walked in on the tryst with Swenson. In a way, I wanted you to understand not in words, but in deeds. I wanted to catch you in a similar circumstance and force you into an unwanted marriage. When you fell in love with Lilith, it was rather unexpected."

"I put a bend in your plans?"

"A very simplified way of how I felt. My goal was to make you suffer. Witnessing your happiness with Lilith was more than I could handle, and I went mad with rage."

"Perhaps we should consider a sanatorium for such instances."

When Nate smiled, she lightly slapped his hand in jest. "Do not suggest such a solution to father. He would find a way to have me locked up when I lose my temper."

"You underestimate everyone in our family. We do love you, even when you are difficult."

Kate shook her head. "No, Nate. No one cares about me or my future. Mr. Wells is evidence of this. If Diana had come to such a scandalous end as I, father would have found her a suitable match. He

would not give her to the first fool to cross our path.”

“Wells is not a fool. I have spoken with him a few times. He is an intelligent man. Stop looking at the outward appearance and try to see what he has to offer.”

“How can I be a distinguished woman of Society with a husband such as he?”

Nate made a show of pondering her predicament. “Perhaps you do not need to be distinguished amongst people who have not a care for you as a person or for your welfare. Society is full of people who want nothing more than to see the most prominent members fall flat on their faces.”

“The problem is, I want to be notable. I want to be the one with the latest fashions and the most beautiful coiffeur. I want people to speak about me in their circles and wonder where I obtained my elegant, silk gown. It has always been my goal to be the most acclaimed member of our family.”

“Why? What need have you for everyone’s esteem?”

“You will never understand what it means to be a lady in Society. There are so many rules and if you do not adhere to them, you will be shunned and looked upon as filth.”

“Society be hanged!”

“Nate,” Kate exclaimed, her face contorted in mock horror. She’d said worse only moments before.

“Society is full of old people and old money who want nothing more than to destroy another person to prop themselves up in a position of importance. You are better than those people. I know you are.”

Kate looked back at her hands, unable to formulate her next thoughts without tears invading the conversation. “What if I am no better than they? Look at what I did to you and Lilith. I hurt you immeasurably.”

“I trust you will do all in your power to fix the error in judgement. Lilith is now to marry Hargrove. She will find happiness, but it would be nice of you to apologize.”

“I will. I promise. When she arrives at Ingram House, I will take great pains to ensure her happiness.”

“I will make a promise to you as well.”

She waited as her brother formulated the words. He looked to take great effort in speaking so she wouldn’t be offended.

“I promise to help make Mr. Wells a dignified member of our family.”

Unbidden tears sprang to her eyes. She furiously wiped them away.

“I hope you will one day come to realize the brilliant offering father has found for you. Mr. Wells is a gem amongst Society.”

“I will have to trust your judgement.”

“Kate, father would not match you with a detestable man. He went to great lengths to convince Wells to marry you.”

“What if Wells never loves me? Am I to live in a marriage without any care from my husband?”

Nate shook his head. She could see he was again on the verge of sleep. “Mr. Wells will love you. He already does. Why else do you think he would put up with your sharp tongue?”

With that final soul-crushing assessment, Nate went back to sleep, leaving Kate to wonder if Nate knew something about Mr. Wells that she had completely missed.



The old feeling of nervousness reentered Lilith's body as she climbed the stairs behind a maid to the sickroom. It was a small comfort to her that Norwood employed different maids for each home. Gwen or Ella wouldn't have shown her the way, even with her title of Lady.

It was easier for her to consider it a sickroom and not Nate's bedchamber. She had little hope of Nate being conscious; when she'd last seen him, Lord Norwood was certain of his son's death and was speaking of burial grounds.

Knowing she couldn't handle watching him die, Lilith had stayed away from Ingram House for a week. When news of his death hadn't arrived, she had decided it was safe to make another visit.

"Is Nathaniel on the mend?"

Speaking to a maid was much easier, now that she'd been one. Although her parents had taught her to be kind to servants, she'd only ever shared conversations with her lady's maid.

"I'm told he is healing quite well."

Lilith knew the maid would share no further information. Maids were loyal to employers like Earl Norwood. When a servant was treated well and with respect, the employer received the same treatment.

Upon entering the chamber, Lilith noticed the curtains were pulled back to allow in the bright, morning sun. The room was cheerful with flowers and cards, and Nate had a number of female visitors who weren't his sisters.

The nervousness she'd carried up the staircase turned to humiliation. Her purpose in visiting was to declare her love to the man, and he was entertaining all of Society. She thought to turn away, when the maid announced her name. She had to enter or suffer publicly for walking away.

"Lady Lilith. You will please excuse my sister and her daughters. They are a lively group." Lady Norwood took hold of Lilith's hands and drew her into the room.

Lilith's anger abated with the statement, and her fussy nerves came

back with a fluttering of butterflies in her stomach. "Sister?"

"Yes."

Lilith looked to Nate to see he was sitting up with a mess of pillows behind his head and two women, who she hoped were cousins keeping him occupied. She recognized one from her years of finishing school, but they hadn't been close.

"This is my sister, Lady Rothenberg and her daughters and one of her sons." Lady Norwood pointed to the brunet closest to Nate. "From the eldest to youngest, Adelaide, Briar, Hazel, Josephine, Clementine, Flora, Maisie, and Augustus."

Adelaide stood, recognition shining in her smile. "Lady Lilith. How do you know Nate?"

She didn't know how to answer as it wasn't a very dignified love story. Fumbling for an answer, Lady Norwood spoke over her. Lilith locked eyes with Nate, and the butterflies in her stomach took flight.

"Duke Somerset and his family are old friends of ours."

If old friends could be stretched to mean acquaintances of mere months, Lilith could accept the response. It was better than sharing stories of scrubbing floors and other distasteful work.

Adelaide strode across the room and took hold of Lilith's hands, blocking her view from Nate. "We all worried when you did not return to Mrs. Lyndell's finishing school. I am so happy to hear your father is alive and well."

Lilith smiled and squeezed her hands to show her appreciation. "No happier than I. Although I was very sad to miss my final year with Mrs. Lyndell and all of my dear friends."

"Lady Rothenberg, let us take tea in the sitting room. We can leave the door open so Lady Lilith and Nate can visit."

Lilith found the removal of Nate's youngest cousins to be humorous. The youngest, Lady Maisie walked to Lilith and stuck a finger out at her for chastisement.

"Do not injure his right leg. It had a very big bullet inside, and the surgeon had to dig it out."

Lilith nodded with a very serious acceptance of the girl's words. "I will endeavor to sit on his left side. I would not want to bring further pain to Nathaniel."

Lady Maisie held a thin book out for Lilith to take. "Nate likes to look at the pictures of the planets in this book, usually. But mama says he is less cheerful right now. Maybe you can look at it with him."

Lilith took the book with a smile. "I will see what I can do to make your cousin's day a bit brighter."

She wanted to move closer to Nate but hesitated as the room emptied. The last time she'd seen him he was drugged and in danger of losing his life. Searching for a way to start a conversation, Lilith

stepped a little closer and held out the book.

"I have not looked at anything to do with astronomy since we last spoke of space moving and Miss Herschel's involvement in the Astronomical Society. Lady Maisie must love you very much to be concerned over your lack of attentiveness to her book."

"My cousins are wonderful."

"Do you see them often?" Lilith took another step closer to him, her angst moving from the fluttering in her stomach to her throat.

"Only during the season. It is rare for them to travel to the Isle and my family does not go to Nottinghamshire often. Marquess Rothenberg and my father only tolerate each other for the sake of their wives."

"They have a large family, as do you."

"Yes. There are two more. My cousins Gilbert and Fletcher are the eldest. Briar, Hazel, and Josephine are triplets. A bit of a surprise for Rothenberg all those years ago." Nate's lips quirked up at the sides with his comment, which put Lilith at ease.

Tension leaving her body, she moved closer and sat in the chair closest to him. Holding the book out, she whispered. "I believe it will make Lady Maisie happy if you will look at the photos with her."

"I will make an effort to be a better cousin."

Lilith smoothed her skirt in an attempt to gather her thoughts. She had so much she wanted to say, yet the words caught in her throat. She struggled to speak, which caused her eyes to fill with tears.

"I have yet to wish you joy. When do you and Hargrove marry?"

Lilith looked into his eyes and wondered if it was difficult for him to ask. She didn't want to cause him distress, but she wanted to know if the news of her engagement had caused him to question the way they'd ended their relationship. As tears formed in the corners of his eyes, she knew it had taken a great amount of humility to ask.

"Hargrove and I are no longer engaged. I asked my father to end the arrangement."

"Why?"

"I do not care for Hargrove in such a way. He is a kind man and will make a good husband, but he is not the one I want."

The room fell silent, and she wondered what he was thinking. In his current state, did he understand she was trying to declare her love for him? She repeated the words in her head, the last part of her statement making sense to her. She was letting him know she wanted him. Why was he not responding? When he did speak, it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"Lilith, I was a fool when last we spoke. Will you ever forgive me?"

She looked down at his hand wishing he would take hold of hers. She could make up the distance, as he was an invalid, but she didn't.

Nervously she pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and played with the corner of the fabric.

“I had a big part in making you look the fool.”

“Then we agree. I am the most foolish man in all of England.”

Lilith looked up to argue, but found he was smiling. She’d missed the way his eyes danced with pleasure. She’d forgotten how his lips would part ever so gently as the gesture opened his expression and pulled her in with wonder.

“Very much so. The problem is, what do we do about it?”

Nate reached out and she gave him her hand. She wished they were sitting in a beautiful orchard or even a garden, and then she remembered the flowers positioned around the chamber and she found contentment with where this conversation would happen.

“There is only one solution. We should marry so no one will discover my foolishness. It will be our secret.”

Lilith bit her bottom lip. She had to know the answer to one question before she could accept his offer. “I will marry you on one condition.”

“I am ready to hear what you require, my lady.”

“Do you love me?” They’d never said the word love to each other, and she knew the torture of the last months for her was due to love, but was it for him as well?

“I do not think love is a strong enough word for the emotions aching to burst from my chest each time I see you. I adore everything about you. I cherish the time we have spent together, and I delight in knowing we will have the rest of our lives to discover what to call this feeling, because love is too simplistic a word.”

Lilith realized he’d openly declared his intentions for her, and she had yet to accept his offer. Wiping the sudden burst of tears from her eyes, Lilith nodded her head unable to speak.

“Are you accepting my offer of marriage?”

She nodded again. Overcome with the bliss of happiness, Lilith cried as he kissed her hand.

“I will need to speak with Duke Somerset before we can make this official.”

She again nodded. There wasn’t a need to speak, words weren’t necessary as they sat in silent comfort.

Kate wasn't ready to be married. Not to Mr. Wells or any other man amongst the *ton*, now that she had time to consider the institution. A life of spinsterhood would serve her well, if she hadn't ruined her reputation. Her father was determined to see her married before she did any more damage to the family name or Nate.

As she exited St Margaret's church on her husband's arm, she wondered at the amount her father had to pay Wells to marry her, since he knew she was ruined. She tried to ignore the smirks sent her way from people she'd once considered friends. The snide remarks she knew were being whispered behind shielded hands made her uneasy.

She wanted to hide. She'd made Wells into the frog man, and now she was married to him. The injustice of the entire situation caused her a deep foreboding. With the festivities of the day coming to a close, Kate wandered out of the ballroom hoping for time to think over her situation. They would leave for Liverpool in the morning. Mr. Wells wanted to spend time with her at his ancestral home before his family arrived. His family would stay in London and finish out the season.

Again, she wasn't ready for such a situation. When she left Ingram House that evening, it would no longer be her home. She walked from one quiet room to the next, entering those shut away from guests. It was silly, as she'd be welcome at Ingram House when in London, but there was a longing to commit everything to memory.

Kate never thought her father would actually make her marry Wells. In her mind it was a way for him to humble her. He'd succeeded. She was the humblest of all his children and would be forever more. A husband she didn't love, and didn't care to look at, awaited her. She would delay as long as possible for the hope that he would take her dowry and run.

As she neared the library, Kate was surprised to see the door ajar. It was a room they kept closed during social gatherings. Peering in to see if someone was using the room, Kate noticed Nate sitting on a chair by the window with Lilith across from him in the window seat. Her maid sat on the sofa making the entire situation proper.

Kate looked longingly upon Nate and Lilith as they sat sequestered in a corner with a telescope. Each time Lilith spoke, Nate's face turned soft and reflective. He truly respected everything she had to say.

Jealousy welled up in Kate's heart. It would be easy to despise her brother and the woman he loved, especially now they had found happiness. She no longer wanted to cause Nate pain, but she also didn't want to see a constant smile on his face. There were appropriate times to frown. But since Lilith's return, he'd become the Nate she'd known her whole life: passionate about science, life, and knowledge, adding to that his admiration for Lilith.

"Let me guess, you find her to be an insufferable bluestocking." Mr. Wells stood next to Kate. She hadn't heard him approach but found she didn't mind. The pleasant scent of eucalyptus on his person made her calm. It was one of many secret likeable thoughts she had of him.

Kate despised women who caught the attention of a man by pretending to enjoy the same interests. It wasn't necessary for women to do so. As she considered explaining her reasonings, Kate realized Lilith wasn't leading Nate to believe she had an interest in astronomy; it was genuine.

"For once you are incorrect, Mr. Wells. I see a woman in love. And I am happy for my brother."

"If you are in earnest, you should remove the scowl from your face."

Kate turned to the man goading her to anger. "I assure you, I am."

"The emotions on your face say otherwise."

"Why do you constantly second guess my every thought?"

"Authenticity does not suit you. As long as I have known you, you have exuded snobbery."

"You have not truly known me."

"Prove me wrong. How long can you go without treating your family with contempt?"

"Why do you care?"

Mr. Wells smiled and leaned against the door in a comfortable pose. His smug countenance bothered Kate. It wasn't fair for him to assume her intentions were unjust.

"I believe you have the ability to be kind. I also believe you want to be better than what you are."

This comment bothered her, but only because he had seen directly into her soul. How was he so perceptive? "If I ask you a very serious question, will you give me an honest answer?"

Wells looked at her as though he were searching her face for sincerity. "Yes."

"Why did you agree to marry me? I do not care for excuses such as

needing my dowry and the boost in Society. I want to know why you would agree to marry the woman who has made you miserable for the past five seasons.”

Wells stepped away from the open door to stand across the hall. Kate followed him, hoping they could have a sincere conversation. She needed to know what had brought this man to the point he would marry such a miserable woman.

Taking a deep breath, Wells took hold of her hands and looked into her eyes. “I have known for five years about the situation between you and Mr. Grey. If you remember, he was a friend of mine. When you and I were introduced, I wanted to ask you to dance but Grey put his hand on my shoulder indicating he would take the loveliest of the two ladies before us. When he returned to the ballroom without you, he bragged about his exploits. I blame myself for the ruin that befell you that night so long ago.”

Kate wanted to lash out and tell him how the hatred within her had grown over five years due to his actions, but she found it was all too exhausting to continue to hold onto such hostility. “You agreed to this marriage out of pity?”

Wells shook his head. “No. I agreed to this marriage because I knew from the moment I met you all those years ago, that you were the woman I would marry. I only needed to find the courage to ask for your hand.”

“But you did not. My father had to pay you to make this day happen.”

“Kate, when you were found with Mr. Swenson, I offered for your hand in marriage that very night. This has never been about a dowry or a boost in social circles. My family has more than enough money and our place in Society is comfortable. This was always about saving you.”

Kate couldn’t speak due to the emotions bubbling up in her chest. If she opened her mouth, she would allow tears to fall, and they wouldn’t be the beautiful, soft tears of a refined woman. She would sound like a blubbering fool and her nose would leak for the joy at hearing his gentle words. One handkerchief would not be enough to fix the flow of emotion. To know a man had cared about her enough to offer marriage when she’d made such a blunder of her life changed everything within her soul. As she looked upon Wells, she wanted more than his admiration; she wanted to love him.

As he still held her hands, Kate pulled him back across the hall so they could peer into the library where her brother sat with the woman he loved. Gathering her wits, she had to ask the one question that had plagued her heart from the moment she’d spied on Nate and Lilith in the meadow. “Do you think we can ever have anything as beautiful

between us as what Nate and Lilith have?”

“Is this the start of change within you?”

Considering his comment, she looked back to her brother and Lilith. Even after all of the pain they’d been through there was a genuine love between them. She wanted the same and yearned for the confirmation from the man she now called husband.

“Perhaps.”

She’d made a plethora of mistakes over the past years. She hadn’t set out to be ruined, and now she didn’t care to keep playing the part of a bitter, enraged woman. She wanted to change and find the girl who had entered Society excited and happy for new experiences. Unfortunately, life hadn’t taken the turns she’d hoped for. But somehow, she could no longer hate Mr. Grey for what he’d done. It would be easy to blame him for all her problems, but now she wanted to start this new life with Mr. Wells and find peace. She realized, she no longer needed to be the center of Society. She only needed to be the center of her husband’s life, and he would be hers.

“I find the change to be attractive.” Mr. Wells made the comment before he turned and walked away, leaving her bewildered and giving her time to digest their conversation.

Kate turned her mind back to the loving couple in the corner. As Nate twisted his fingers in the curls flowing from the bun on Lilith’s head, Kate hoped one day Mr. Wells would love her as much as Nate loved Lilith.



## Epilogue

Nate paced the drawing room with a cane in one hand and an

obvious limp. It'd been over an hour since the midwife arrived and not a word had come to him of Lilith's condition. When they'd married the previous summer, he hadn't thought of bringing a child into the world so soon. With her time approaching, he worried about fatherhood.

Samuel and Trenton made rearing children look easy. But he knew the struggles his parents had with each of his siblings, and he worried he would end up with the child that misbehaved the most.

"Calm down, Nate. You know childbirth takes time." Samuel clapped him on the shoulder with an encouraging smile.

"I do not remember Abby taking so long. It seemed like her pains started and within the hour you had Fintan."

"Seven hours later. Please keep your comments on Abby's pains silent. I would not want her displeasure focused upon you."

Nate smiled at his brother's comments, but it was difficult to believe Abby had taken so long during childbirth. "Perhaps Debra was the one who delivered quickly."

Trenton made a ghastly loud noise when clearing his throat. "Ten hours. I was certain Matthew would never arrive."

"Really? So long?" Nate paced back to the window, hoping Lilith and the babe threatening to arrive a bit early would speed up. "But they were both to term?"

"Yes." Samuel and Trenton spoke at the same time. This was Nate's biggest worry. Lilith's pains shouldn't have started so early.

Nate wanted to turn back to his brothers and ask more questions, but his curiosity peaked with a carriage bounding up the drive.

"Are we expecting company?" Nate asked.

"No." Norwood answered, joining Nate by the window.

They stood in silence until the crest on the carriage was visible. "Mr. and Mrs. Wells." Nate raised his eyebrows in surprise. Liverpool was not a quick jaunt to the Isle.

As Kate walked through the doors, she looked at Nate. "I have not missed the birth. Tell me I am on time."

“Lilith’s pains started this morning. The child is not yet here. How did you know?”

“We were visiting friends nearby. Lilith sent for me.” Kate turned to Wells and kissed him on the cheek before racing out of the parlor.

Nate knew Lilith and Kate exchanged regular correspondence, but he’d never considered his wife would send for Kate upon the start of her pains. Nate raised a questioning eyebrow to Wells. He hadn’t spent any time with the couple since their marriage. “Kate seems happy.”

“You will see a great many changes in Kate.” Wells offered no further explanation, and Nate allowed the intrigue of the comment to occupy his thoughts, if only to keep them off the birth happening only one floor above. He hoped Kate was happy in her situation.

Nate sat in a chair when his hip caused him pain. It only did so when he put too much pressure on it or when the weather made sudden changes. He closed his eyes to think of something other than his wife suffering to bring a child into the world when the door opened, and Kate entered with a small bundle in her arms. Nate stood to look beneath the blanket. A small head with the tiniest nose he’d ever seen slept in his sister’s arms.

“You have a son.”

The words sounded cheap for the overwhelming joy bursting out of his smile. As she maneuvered the infant into Nate’s arms, he looked upon the little babe in shock. “Lilith? Can I see her?”

“Not yet.”

“She is well?” He needed an answer to this question. The pains she’d had before the midwife arrived were terrible.

“This little one will need a wet nurse.”

His father walked forward to look at the tiny child. “What do you plan to name this little lad?” Worried over his wife, Nate eased the babe into Norwood’s arms.

“Have you and Lilith discussed names?” Samuel’s simple question brought him back to the conversation.

He looked at the little baby and remembered the nighttime conversations. She loved the constellations and mused over naming their children after the stars.

“Orion William Richardson.”

“Orion?” Norwood’s tone told Nate he disapproved of the name. “Nathaniel, this is the name your son will have to give to others when he is an adult. He will not have a title to hide behind. If you insist on giving him a unique name, I suppose he could use his second name when the time comes. I am very proud to have a grandchild with my Christian name.”

He remembered when Abby had been in labor. After the child was brought in, Samuel was allowed to see his wife. Entertaining thoughts

of forcing his way into the chamber, Nate was happy to see Diana enter the room. His eyes dropped to a bundle in her arms. Uncertain what to expect, Nate took a step backwards.

"This little one will not harm you."

"Another?" The word slipped out before he could stop it. Another child was the last surprise he'd expected.

"You did not think Lilith was so large with only one child inside?"

"The midwife never mentioned twins."

Diana nudged her head and Nate held his arms out to take the next babe. It looked exactly the same as the first with the tiny, button nose.

"You have another son. You should be very proud of Lilith." Diana took her time situating the bundle in Nate's arms while she chatted.

"Can I see Lilith?"

"No. I am afraid not. She delivered these little ones with perfection. I should think you will be allowed to see her before long."

As Diana left, Nate turned to his smiling father and brothers. He had one word on his mind. "Twins?"

"Well, let us hope you have another name picked out. You could name him after Duke Somerset." Norwood suggested.

Nate nodded. Even with the surprise of the two children and the annoyance of not seeing his wife, Nate smiled as he looked down at the newest member of their family. "Betelgeuse Oscar Richardson."

A bit of laughter went around the room. Nate looked up to see a pained expression on his father's face. It brought a moment of lighthearted laughter to push out his worry. Norwood understood his sons had interests outside of land management and Society, but Nate was certain at that moment his father regretted allowing him to study astronomy in great depth.

"Can you not give the child a respectable name? Perhaps use Betelgeuse as a second to Oscar?"

Nate considered it and looked down at his son. "If Lilith decides to change the order, I will let her do so."

Norwood looked to the ceiling. "Dearest Lilith, please do not keep us in suspense any longer."

With the moment of laughter over, Nate relinquished the small bundle to Samuel. He was already a father and an expert on holding babies. Nate looked to the door, waiting for the moment he'd be allowed to go to his wife.

As the door opened for a third time, Nate rushed across the room. He wasn't to be deterred any longer. He wanted to see his wife. Instead, Nate stopped as Kate entered with another bundle.

"You cannot be serious?" Norwood's exclamation expressed everything within Nate's mind.

"A third?" Nate looked to the tiny bundle to see an even smaller

babe than the other two— same button nose.

“A little girl.”

Nate wanted to rejoice and laugh along with his family, but he couldn't fathom Lilith giving birth to three babies. The pain she'd been in that morning reentered his mind and he worried after her.

“Lilith?” He needed to know. He wouldn't be refused for the third time.

“You will be allowed to see her as soon as the midwife is finished.”

As before, Kate nudged with her head until he held his arms out for the tiny infant. Nate turned back to Norwood to see reserved joy.

“Well, let us have the name of this sweet, little girl.” Norwood stood with the eldest of Nates triplets in his hands.

“Rigel Eleanora Richardson.”

When Nate and the triplets were allowed into Lilith's bedchamber, she sat propped up with pillows awaiting their arrival. Even with a shadow under her eyes, and her obvious exhaustion, Nate believed she'd never looked more beautiful.

“Can you believe our luck?” Lilith laughed as she accepted one of the babies. Nate looked at the child, trying to remember which one was Orion and which was Betelgeuse.

“They look too similar. I cannot remember which is the eldest.” Nate studied the faces of both boys and shook his head in bewilderment. “What are we to do?”

His mother walked forward and unfolded the blanket on the child in his arms. “This one is the younger. We put yellow socks on his feet.”

Nate quirked an eyebrow at his wife. “I think we are in trouble with these three.”

Lilith laughed and took hold of his hand. “I prefer to consider it the start of a grand adventure.”

## About the Author



Angela Johnson has a love of literature and all things Regency. She loves adventure. Traveling and reading are favorite past times and help her form ideas for writing, but she loves being home in Utah surrounded by beautiful mountains.

For more books and updates:  
[www.angelajohnsonauthor.org](http://www.angelajohnsonauthor.org)



Also by Angela Johnson

Earls of England Series

The Earl of Arundel

Saved by Scandal

An Assingation to Remember Series

Wit & Intrigue

Unmasking a Lady

Maid in the Stars